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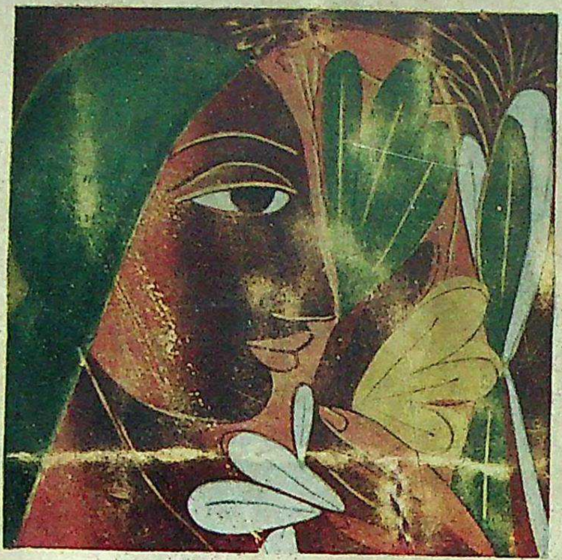

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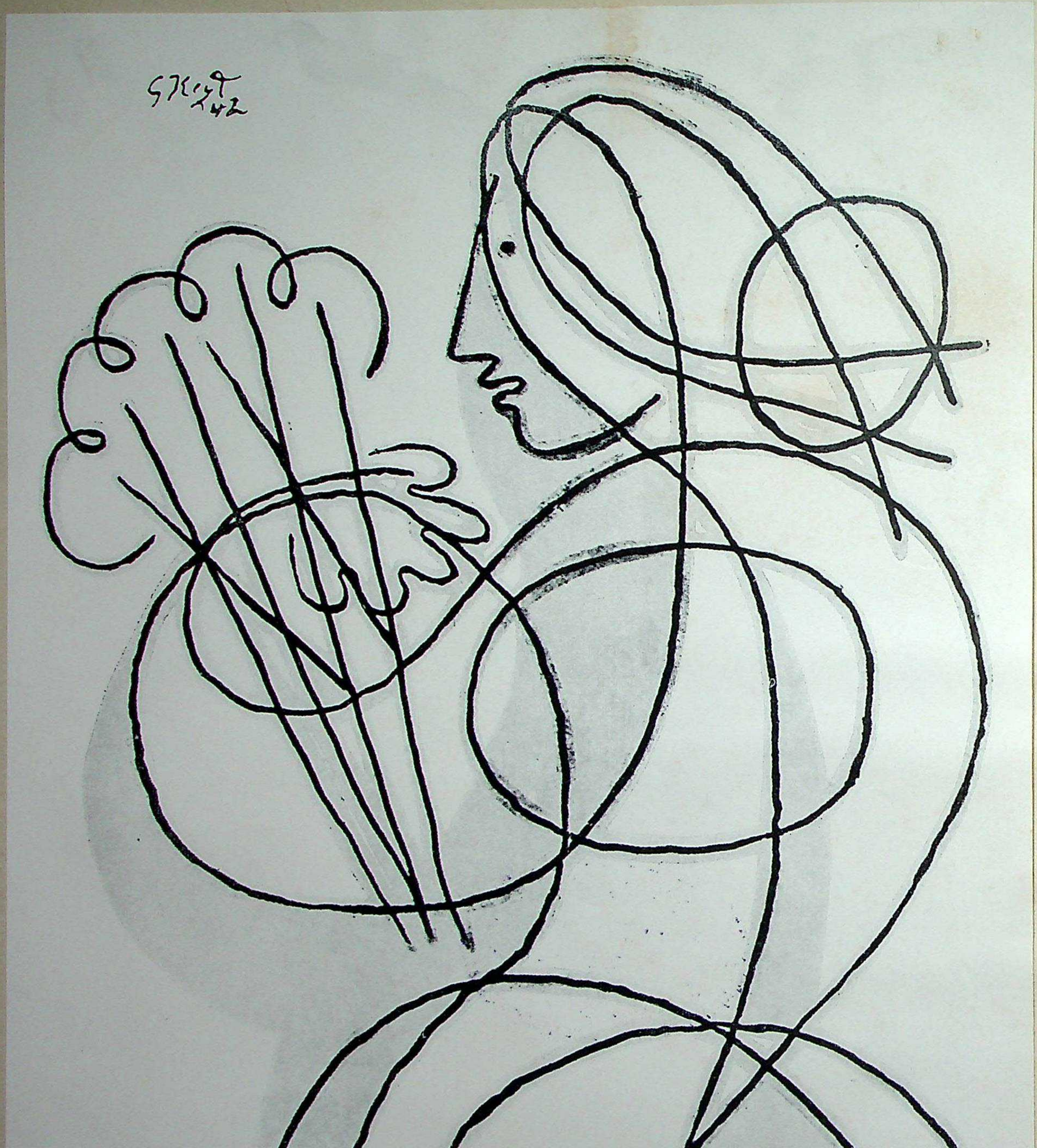

Woman with Sheaf—*George Keyt*

THREE PAINTERS

R. de L. FURTADO

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R. de L. F.

New Delhi,
March, 1960.

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INTRODUCTION

IN the independent India of today, the spirit of patient research and experimentation is reaching out towards newer and fuller forms of self-realization, as much in the cultural and artistic spheres of activity as in the political and the economic. The annual outflow of spirited new conceptions from the brushes of our artists—this ceaseless endeavour to arrive at finer forms of expression—is in perfect accord with the versatility and strength of the nation's artistic heritage.

The search for more expressive form has not, however, been without its periods of sterility. Long periods of creative activity, which we today recall with nostalgia, have been followed by periods of inertia. In the art history of India, the lull between the end of the Moghul rule and the end of the nineteenth century saw the complete degeneration of art. Although a tenuous form of painting was still flourishing in some cities, the main line of Indian painting, including Rajput painting, was inexorably waning, and there was nothing to arrest its decline. The cause of this debacle lay in the political and sociological conditions prevailing in the country. With their personalities cramped by alien domination, the native craftsmen made a few abortive attempts at ornate and mediocre pieces which were hardly in keeping with the high tradition of their elders.

In the midst of this inaction, the first signs of a revolt suddenly flared up. The deep scholarship and profound vision of an Englishman, E. B. Havell, who was appointed Principal of the Calcutta School of Art in 1896, fanned the embers of native creativeness to a new life. He not only first pointed out all the poetry and vitality of the arts in the vast sub-continent, but was also a pioneer who encouraged Indian artists to fashion a medium of expression of their own. He was the first to project before the world at large the magnificent sweep and variety of Indian art.

Havell wrote: "I was sent out to India to instruct Indians in art, and, having instructed them and myself to the best of my ability, I returned filled with amazement at the insularity of the Anglo-Saxon mind, which has taken more than a century to discover that we have far more to learn from India in art than India has to learn from Europe."

During the last decade of nineteenth century a gallant band of enthusiasts sought out the Indian painting from the past, practised the finer points of Japanese and Persian art, and adopted the pristine traditional forms of India. They strove to resuscitate the old tradition by discarding the western element which had gradually crept into contemporary art. Their objective was noble, and their paintings exuded an abundance of cloying lyricism. They were the founders of the Bengal School. Their greatest luminary was Abanindranath Tagore. Havell called him the "founder of a new school to which the future belongs."

But the persistent exploitation of the selfsame stereotypes wore the edge off the new enthusiasm, and originality was soon bogged down in a rut of pale humdrum repetition. They had nothing new to offer. Their day was done.

Whatever its faults, the Bengal School was the precursor of a dynamic aesthetic awareness, a prelude to fresh conquests and initiative.

To revitalise Indian painting and to infuse into it a new creative urge, nothing more forceful than the altogether disturbing works of three artists—Amrita Sher-Gil, George Keyt and M. F. Husain—could have been desired. Their works not only breathed into Indian painting a new pulsating vigour but also imparted to it a distinctive personality and a character all its own.

2

OUTSTANDING in the development of modern Indian painting, these three are distinctly oriental in their approach to their art. Their method of expression often bears a remarkable similarity to western art, but it is, at the core, of the colourful native grain. The synthesis which they effected by combining the western manner with the spirit of the East represents the culmination of the ceaseless struggle to free artistic creation from ethnic barriers and to establish the universality of art.

Before analysing the influence of the West on Indian painting, it would be well to study the oriental element which preceded the work of these three painters. It would also be useful to trace backwards into history the philosophic structure of all artistic creation in India.

Havell establishes a difference between western and oriental approach to art. Having studied closely the art of India, especially Indian miniatures, he reached the conclusion that the function of memory was more important than merely copying nature.

"The academic methods of the new school of Indian art," wrote Havell, "is really a return to the Asiatic principles, on which all true oriental art practice is based.... In an ordinary European art academy the student goes through a long, laborious and rather painful process of eye training to develop his imitative powers before he is allowed to realise that art really depends for its vitality and strength upon the creative faculties. The oriental artist develops his imitative skill mainly by the exercise of his creative powers; his first and last aim is to cultivate a habit of mind-seeing. The modern European practice of dressing up a series of living models or lay figures in costume and then painting them one by one as a piece of still life would seem to the oriental artist a most feeble and inartistic method of creation. He will sit down for an hour, a day or a week, and create the picture in his own mind; and not until the mind-image is complete will he set to work to transfer it to paper or canvas. What models he needs he must use while the mind-picture is being formed—never in the realization of it by pigments or painting. Therefore, memory work takes a much more important place than mere copying from nature, and a habit of intense mental concentration is developed from the earliest stage of his artistic career. I venture to think that the usual western academic method would be immensely improved, if we tried to learn a little more of eastern."

As in the Italian Renaissance, art in ancient India was dominated by a preoccupation with religious subject matter. Only after a long spell of meditation and introspective exploration did art come to concern itself with reality and life.

Vatsyayana, who lived in the third century of this era, first summarised in his *Kama Sutra* the principles which must govern all painting. Following the time-honoured dictates of his day, he classified various aspects of painting into six categories, which more or less defined all artistic creation with a ready yardstick.

The six categories were:

1. Knowledge of forms and appearances—*Rupa-bheda*;
2. Measurement, scale and correct perception—*Pramanam*;
3. Expression and feeling—*Bhava*;

4. Realization of grace and beauty—*Lavanya Yojanam*;
5. Similitude—*Sadrisyam*; and
6. Technical use of materials—*Varnikabhanga.*

Having disciplined himself with a severe yogic ritual, which involved concentration and a probing of the innermost recesses of the self, the artist, according to Vatsyayana, was ready to grasp the quintessence of forms and appearances. Because the Hindu philosophy considers phenomenal reality as nothing more than illusion, or *maya*, the appearances and forms had to undergo a sort of purification from all adventitious taint, the resultant image in the artist's consciousness becoming a symbol rather than a picture of the thing itself. This process of purification amounted almost to a mystic experience.

Some artists also considered themselves devotees of Vishvakarma, the "great and deathless god, Lord of the Arts." The forms and appearances, once on the anvil of a ruthless cerebration, were said to partake something of the divine; they became part of the process known as *sruti.* The spiritual vision was next transferred to the medium, either wall painting or sculpture, with the aid of the remaining five categories. These were but parts of acquired, not intuitive, knowledge. They constituted the process known as *smriti.*

How, precisely, was the artist to arrive at the moment of divine revelation?

Dr. Ananda Coomaraswamy, writing on a Buddhist tantra of about the 12th century, expounds the tantric method which demands that the artist must among other things meditate on "the original purity of the first principle of things, and on what comes to the same thing, on their emptiness or absolute non-existence... Only when the personality of the individual is thus set aside is he able to invoke the deity.... For complete comprehension is only possible when the conscious is thus identified with an object of cognition."

The complete surrender of personality was to lead the artist to the execution of works in which idealism was to supersede all other things. This trait, so familiar in the delicate lyricism of the wall paintings of Ajanta, was to dominate most Indian art.

It would be opportune to remark that in western art the mystic element and the abjuration of personality was a prominent facet of the work of some painters of the Italian Renaissance. The superb abstraction of the paintings of Fra Angelico demonstrates the ultimate purity of their begetting.

The representational aspect of Indian art is further enhanced by the subtle vein of idealism in which there always exist traces of a highly analytical and introspective preoccupation. The representational and the decorative are thus often, but not always, blended to produce a particular aesthetic feeling. The essence of all Indian art is the *rasa*, which means beauty or aesthetic emotion or feeling. *Rasa* has been translated by Dr. Coomaraswamy as flavour. A work of art must needs be *rasavant*, that is, it must be beautiful in itself. This experience of beauty, Dr. Coomaraswamy tells us, is "pure invisible self manifested, compounded equally of joy and consciousness, free of admixture with any other perception, the very twin brother of mystic experience and the very life of it is supersensuous wonder."

All the generalizations we arrive at after examining Indian art are much the same as those about classical western art. It would seem that, after all, these generalizations spring from the same fountainhead—the human spirit.

If beauty, as Winckelmann puts it, separated from and independent of goodness is the law and the aim of all art, then the wall paintings of ancient India do necessarily fall within the ambit of the western concept of the beautiful. The tenets of the Kantian aesthetic are similarly applicable. In its subjective meaning beauty is that which, in general and necessarily, with no reasonings and practical advantage, is a source of pleasure; on the objective side, it is the form of a thing in so far as that thing is perceived without any conception of its utility.

There is hardly any message implied in the wall paintings of India showing *apsaras* scattering flowers on a cloud or in the paintings of various episodes in the life of the Buddha. The episodes and the flowers are mere pretexts for the translation of a beautiful spiritual experience, which must necessarily end with the completion of the painting.

But modern Indian painting is not trammelled by the rigid stringencies of ancient art. With a sense at once accommodating and timely, the Indian artist has evolved a method of integrating the salient features of the past with the dynamism of the present. The myth and the religious motif are still with us, but only their essence is perpetuated. Shorn of all obsolete trappings, the rich lore of India is thus revived again with the throb of a new and richer vision. Here is where Amrita Sher-Gil, George Keyt and M. F. Husain come in.

AMRITA SHER-GIL

"AS soon as I put my foot on Indian soil, not only in subject, spirit, but also in technical expression, my painting underwent a great change, becoming more fundamentally Indian," wrote Amrita Sher-Gil with splendid candour. She had spent five years in Paris, had returned to India, and was presently commenting on her work.

She added: "I realised my real artistic mission then: to interpret the life of Indians and particularly the poor Indians pictorially; to paint those silent images of infinite submission and patience; to depict their angular brown bodies, strangely beautiful in their ugliness; to reproduce on canvas the impression their sad eyes created on me."

These are words charged with a strong, transparent honesty. They bring into focus the character of the person who wrote them. For Miss Sher-Gil was one of those rare artists who have a steadfast faith in themselves and in their work. The substance and meaning of their lives are, as it were, channelled towards providing for mankind a truer vision of reality.

Amrita Sher-Gil was born in Budapest in 1913. Her father, Sardar Umrao Singh, was a Sikh aristocrat and scholar who had delved deeply into oriental and western philosophies. Her mother was a Hungarian with great artistic sensibility.

Miss Sher-Gil was eight years old when her parents returned to India. After a stay of three years, she was sent to Florence to study drawing under an Italian art mistress. This sojourn, however, lasted only a few months and she returned to India again.

In 1929 Miss Sher-Gil went to Paris and joined the *Ecole des Beaux Arts*. Here she came in contact with the radical trends in modern art, and in 1932 she had the rare distinction of exhibiting at the *Grand Salon*. She won many prizes, and a year later was elected an associate of the *Salon*.

Her days in Paris were now drawing to a close and she felt a strong yearning to return home. "I began to be haunted," she wrote, "by an intense longing to return to India, feeling in some strange inexplicable way that there lay my destiny as a painter. It was the vision of a winter in India—desolate yet strangely beautiful—of endless tracks of luminous yellow-grey land, of dark-bodied, sad-faced, incredibly thin men and women who move silently, looking almost like silhouettes, and over which an indefinable melancholy reigns. It was different from the India, voluptuous, colourful, sunny and superficial, the India so false to tempting travel posters, that I expected to see."

On her return home after five years, the desolate grey panorama and the hungry jostling multitudes had a profound effect on Miss Sher-Gil's conception of her country. So great was the impact of the Indian reality on her senses that she summarily discarded all academic niceties and plunged headlong into the method she was presently to evolve.

After the first shock of recognition—"those silent images of infinite submission and patience"—she proceeded to recreate the sad, silent spectacle which was unrolling continuously before her eyes. But she did it with vigour and truthfulness, without succumbing to sentimental stereotypes of academic portrayal.

Then came a new revelation. She saw for the first time the superb abstraction of the wall paintings of Ajanta, the sculpted gods and goddesses cluttering the walls of Indian temples, the Moghul portraiture, the distortions of form and the screaming hot colours of the miniatures of Basohli, a village on the hills of the Punjab.

Miss Sher-Gil had already seen the oriental collections in the museums of Europe. She was familiar with the great masters of France and of other countries. But the art of India which she was now contemplating was something different, something altogether disturbing. It was magnificent art. And she was, so to say, swept off her feet when she discovered this vein of gold running through the ancient art of India.

And beside all this grandeur she was to find, much to her annoyance, the contemporary cult of the Victorian cliches and the saccharine inanities which were regarded as the true art of India. She rebelled against the prevailing mediocrity; her outspokenness was greatly resented by the pontifical, official purveyors of art. They failed to recognise her genius simply because they were ignorant, biased and incapable of seeing new light. They were all sticklers for tradition, a tradition based on pseudo-romance, prettiness and conformity. They were living in a world of hypnotic self-delusion, clinging for all their worth to a fossilized tradition. But to Miss Sher-Gil's discriminating eye Indian art was then passing through a slough of pitiful decadence and utter bad taste.

She rebelled against all this. Hers was a solitary voice, feebly protesting. It was a *vox clamans in deserto.*

But she was made of fine mettle and struggled against this tide of philistinism, knowing full well that light would some day break through the murk of the general apathy and ignorance. And light did come at last . . . alas, when she was dead after a brief seven years of relentless creativity. In December 1941, Amrita Sher-Gil, one of the truly gifted and greatest painters of modern India, passed away quietly after a brief illness.

2

DURING her stay in Paris Amrita Sher-Gil absorbed all contemporary art movements but fell deeply under the spell of Post-Impressionist trends in painting. After acquiring mastery over draughtsmanship, she perfected it by striving after greater plasticity of form, which, in her case, was eventually reduced to its bare essentials.

Her early paintings have in spite of her positively individualistic stamp all the trimmings of academic art. She experimented and groped for a style of her own, but her genius had not yet matured to grasp the essence of the forms. The paintings of Cezanne taught her to organise closed, complete compositions within controlled and deliberately limited space. There was also that purposeful exploitation of all possibilities of moulding the form, without any regard for the narrative or emotional content of the theme or subject.

The result of this controlled arrangement of space and form was to create an effect of permanence and durability. Colour was also used with careful deliberation. "When colour has its richness," Cezanne had said, "form has its plenitude." But colour could be used in other ways also, and Miss Sher-Gill was to discover that splendid miracle in Gauguin's paintings where colour brings out the spiritual and emotional content within the limits of controlled form. She also grasped something of that inpassivity of expression and immobility which characterise Gauguin's figures. She studied with a relentless determination the eloquent simplicity of these two masters—Cezanne and Gauguin—and cultivated a detachment of observation that was to lead her to paint the masterpieces of her later years.

Miss Sher-Gil's paintings failed to rouse interest among the Indian critics. They were bewildered by them and at once labelled her a follower of western schools of art and one who was unable to follow the tradition of the land. In this and in other judgments they were wrong. They were wrong because they were accustomed to see only paintings larded with sentimentality, and Miss Sher-Gil's work had neither a message nor was the sort of thing that pleases unschooled and parochial minds. Her paintings were stark representations wrought with a ruthless simplification and a clamant interplay of glowing colours. There was above all honesty and power in her paintings. There was no prettiness in them, nothing to please the popular taste.

Amrita Sher-Gil laid down her artistic creed. "Good art," she wrote, "always tends towards simplification, that is to say, it only considers the essentials of a form, the stress is invariably laid on the *textural* and *structural* beauty of the work instead of the beauty of the *subject* depicted. It is characterized by vitality of execution, pungency, and never has the slightest trace either of prettiness or sugariness. It is invariably stylized. Form is never imitated, it is always interpreted. Bad art, on the other hand, has always been characterized by softness of execution and conception, floridity, effeminacy of treatment and stress on unessential detail. Form is either photographically imitated or stylized in the wrong sense; i. e., idealized in the sense of feeble prettiness. It is diametrically opposed to the vital and significant stylization of form that characterizes the sculpture and painting of Ellora, Ajanta, Egyptian, Chinese, Japanese, Early Christian, Impressionist and Post-Impressionist art."

In 1936 Miss Sher-Gil exhibited at Delhi, Bombay, Hyderabad and Allahabad. The response from the public was far from enthusiastic. She found herself in a quandary. What was she to do? There was only one way out for her: to keep on painting the way she wanted to paint. That is, to work without in any way tainting her principles and her integrity.

She converged all her energies on portraying the desolate land which was stalked by sad, dark-bodied, angular men and women. She portrayed the human condition in all its depressing, stark nakedness. And above all, she discovered her place in the scheme of things and realized that the past belonged to the past and the present must hammer out an idiom of its own.

She wrote: "The fundamental idea of that form of Indian art which drew its inspiration from Ajanta (that really great and eternal example of pure painting) was right to begin with because it started with the principle of the primordial importance of *significant form*, but unfortunately except for a few men of talent who have wrestled successfully with the coils of mythological convention this art has developed an illustrative tendency that has gone to the detriment of the fundamental principles and tends to devitalize and render it effeminate in execution. It has committed the mistake of feeding almost exclusively on the tradition of mythology and romance and no art can do that with impunity for any length of time. Art cannot imitate the forms of the past."

The term 'significant form', as a criterion of a work of art, originated with the English champion of Post-Impressionism, Clive Bell, who was the first to propound the theory in his book, *Art*, in 1913. "There must be some quality," he wrote, "without which a work of art cannot exist... What quality is shared by all objects that provoke our aesthetic emotions? Only one answer seems possible—Significant Form. In each, lines and colour combined in a particular way, certain forms and relations of forms stir our aesthetic emotion. These... I call Significant Form and Significant Form is the one quality common to all works of visual art."

Roger Fry, who was Bell's friend and one of those who introduced to England the Post-Impressionist art of France, expressed fully on significant form in his book *Vision and Design*. "I think we are all agreed," wrote Fry, "that we mean by significant form something other than agreeable arrangements of form, harmonious patterns, and the like. We feel that a work which possesses it is the outcome of an endeavour to express an idea rather than to create a pleasing object. Personally, at least, I always feel that it implies the effort on the part of the artist to bend to our emotional understanding by means of his passionate conviction some intractable material which is alien to our spirit."

Since it was useless recreating the art of the past and equally undesirable to indulge in the saccharine inanities that were perpetrated by her contemporaries, Miss Sher-Gil tried to fuse together the classical pristine forms of India and the spirit of her time. She succeeded admirably in synthesizing the western artistic temperament with the essence of Indian forms. And from her keen intellect there issued masterpieces in which the organization of colour and the plasticity of design demonstrate a new, original and sterling personal style. This was a style of her own creation, forged in the crucible of her brilliant imagination and her acutely analytical insight. Her paintings had what W. G. Archer aptly termed an 'Indianness' of character.

3

THERE is quite a leap in Miss Sher-Gil's work from her Paris period to her last years in India. From the staid academicism of *Two Sisters* (Plate 1) to *Boy with Apples* (Plate 7) there is a relentless progression towards an austere Cezannesque monumentality. The flesh tints in *Tahitian Girl* (Plate 8), which is a repository of that lax sensuality exuding from the rich ripe bodies of Tahitian women, dissolve into the frieze-like procession of the stylized forms in *South Indian Villagers Going to Market* (Plate 11). Here we have the culmination of her Indianness: gesture without motion, a glimpse into the incontrovertible grey reality that is India. *Red Clay Elephant* (Plate 16) is a beautiful fantasy, a superb example of the artist's control over colour. Here everything is simplified. And the colour speaks for itself.

The predominance of colour over the barest essentials of form becomes in Miss Sher-Gil's hands, through a strange osmotic process, an experience that never fails to stir the emotions. There is throughout a judicious and disciplined concern for the ultimate aesthetic result, and sentimentality is eschewed on all occasions. The paintings constitute a bare statement of fact, but a fact throbbing with a vibrant inner life.

The wistful and haunting ambience that pervades her canvases is symptomatic of her passionate regard for those dark-bodied, sad-faced men and women over whom an indefinable melancholy reigns. They are the same people, lost and carrying the burden of an unspeakable secret grief, whom Alun Lewis was to meet in India in 1942:

> "But the people are hard and hungry and have no love,
> Diverse and alien, uncertain in their hate,
> Hard stones flung out of creation's silent matrix
> And the Gods must wait."

In her last years, Miss Sher-Gil's forms became more staid and monumental. Her areas of colour became wider, more expressive. And the sum total of her compositions, always in high colour, revealed the mastery of her singular style, greater daring, and the intelligent harmony of her method.

Her life was completely dedicated to art. She lived in a world that failed to appreciate her magnificent genius. But she remained, rock-like, true to her principles and she left behind her masterpieces of supreme ineluctable beauty.

"Her art," wrote Karl Khandalavala, "was a direct antithesis of what prevailed in India. It had elemental power and was animated by a serious purpose. It was not random painting, the outcome of sudden impulses, nor just pictorial documentation. Here was a search for ultimate truth through the medium of aesthetic organization."

Regarded by some as the greatest painter of modern India, Amrita Sher-Gil did not have world enough, nor time enough, to realize in full her rare aesthetic vision. She was a realist at heart. Her integrity brooked no dilly-dallying with art. Her almost hieratic devotion to her profession was never tainted with desire for easy lucre or ephemeral recognition.

She compressed into the brief seven years of her creativity relentless effort to experiment and fashion her work with the conscious yet irksome knowledge that for her, as for everybody else, spring must soon vanish with the rose. That is why she worked so feverishly. There was so little time.

GEORGE KEYT

GEORGE KEYT was born in Ceylon in 1901. A descendant of Ceylonese and European forbears, he attended Trinity College, Kandy, and soon evinced an interest in Indian and European literatures. It is said that as a boy he made illustrations for Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*, a poem his father often read to him aloud.

At the age of twenty-six Keyt discovered that painting was his metier. He began to learn all the technical niceties about painting and embraced, among other things, the Buddhist faith. Buddhism, with its tolerance and humanism, was to mould to a large extent all Keyt's future work.

The beneficent influence of this gentle faith, allied to Keyt's study of Hindu philosophy and mythology—he had already published translations from Sanskrit and Sinhalese—was to manifest itself in the powerful yet tender paintings which have earned for him a niche among the greatest painters of the East.

But the very immediate contact with the ancient art of Ceylon was to exert a predominant force on most of Keyt's early work.

Ceylon, with its splendid environment of lush tropical flora and the sophistication of its inhabitants, is indeed a storehouse of ineffable beauty. In that island there are, for instance, the wall paintings of Sigiriya, which contain something of the lyricism of Ajanta and Bagh; the bronzes and the 12th century frescoes of Polonnaruwa; the murals in the Buddhist temples of the old city of Anuradhapura. Keyt drew both from the Hindu and Buddhist traditions and ultimately enriched them with his own genius.

In 1930 Keyt and two other distinguished artists, Beling and Winzer, exhibited their work in Ceylon. Some reviews in the local press were far from complimentary. But Pablo Neruda, the Chilean poet, said of the exhibition: "Keyt, I think, is the living nucleus of a great painter. In all his work there is the moderation of maturity, the beautiful stability of achievement—qualities most precious in so young an artist. Magically though he places his colours, and carefully though he distributes his plastic volumes, Keyt's pictures nevertheless produce a dramatic effect, particularly in his paintings of Sinhalese people. These figures take on a strange expressive grandeur, and radiate an aura of intensely profound feeling."

George Keyt does not subscribe to any loud theory of art, nor is he interested in the complex movements of the day. Rather, his art is the spontaneous outpouring of an intense sensibility allied with a consummate mastery of colour and design.

"I can only say," Keyt asserts, "that I have always been impelled to continue the Indian tradition in the idiom of today, irrespective of nationality. My work is said to be stamped with individuality, which is perhaps true considering that the nature of my effort places me outside any conformity with groups and schools."

2

THIS repudiates the oft-made charge that Keyt's later work is rather an unwarranted adaptation of contemporary French painters. Modern French painting, which has discarded representationalism, has indeed influenced Keyt's pictures. But their core, in spite of the framework of expression and the idiosyncrasy involved, retains the unmistakable nature of Indian art. Keyt's is essentially Asiatic art.

Dr. Klaus Fischer, extolling the admirable synthesis wrought by Keyt, says: "One will not suspect such a great artist as the Ceylonese painter George Keyt of having copied western models without own genius; when abstracting more and more from naturalistic form he is following ancient artistic ideas of East and West; the fact that he applies the technique developed in the West shows him a citizen of the modern world."

Keyt's broad outlook, which transcends provincial barriers and seeks freedom by availing itself of the heterogeneous currents of thought, amounts to a blossoming, a fuller unravelling of the self. Whatever one has to offer, one must. An adequate example is found in his poems. He has published them in three books, the last of which, *Image in Absence*, appeared in 1937. Here we discern faint echoes of the concept of sensory interrelation of things, not to speak of what Baudelaire, using the language of Swedenborg, was to call 'correspondences.'

Thus from *Image in Absence*:

I gaze into the sound of a name
Like flavour in colour, like colour in sound,
Recalling an image in exile,
And I see a great disc in the sky where many rings involve the darkening clouds
And like a cone in recession the disc resembles a whirlpool
Holding far down within it an image in exile.

I await in terror the awakening of the wind of distraction,
In fear, imagining the wind dead for ever,
The wind throwing into turmoil of forgetfulness
The foliage of longings and the cobwebs,
The helpless shreds of despair;
And the wind arises in the foliage
Among clouds and cobwebs, in dust and on water,
And my terror dies with the departure of intimate silence,
And the stillness of the dead noon around me,
The motionless arrival of an absence
Come again to haunt me.

The mind entranced stands like a hill,
Solitary, severed from companions of distraction,
In refuge, in retreat from the vague plains,
From tractless forests and marshes, from aimless water, from accidental mists
        not seeking to honour one object,
The shapeless things of an absence delayed too long
Causing in consequence an image to be lost in estrangement.

My senses convey to me the signs of a forest.
It seems the wind wears a look of having seduced the trees.
The sky appears to be ready to revive the streams when they pause.
But I look around to find myself in a desert;
The shadowless plain extends for ever,

And I see, above the burning waste, a solitary cloud in starvation
Looking down on the anger of the sun endeavouring to feed it.

In a ravaged place
The wind never slackening
Bends in extremity the stripped branches.
In the torment of a vague menace
The rigid archways of endurance crumbling
Are about to collapse.

An inclination arises to restrain the voice no longer
But announce in blind terror—
Like others lost in confusion
Writhing in unknown fear—
The sign of an approaching disaster.
But that which clutches at my feet,
The smile of malice,
Suppresses display,
And my fear lies in reserve
Screening from any eyes but my own
The terror denied to my voice.

The boats are avoided, and the comradeship on the banks of the river,
And every other vehicle of security;
There shall be nothing left.
A malicious smile is seen
And the patient look of things that bear no love
Watching in silence
Rooted for fear of missing a calamity,
The tireless eyes that keep watching for destruction
Night and day
When the river rises in flood.

The persecution of the smile of malice
Persistent like an unsolved thought
Makes itself seen at every moment
Following my movements at every turn
And I summon all my force of temerity
To conceal the silent cry of my reactions
And the clamour of my heart urging retreat
Recoiling from an imminence of disaster.

3

KEYT'S art gradually evolved from the representational delineation of form to the sophisticated austerity of his recent work. In *Kandyan Scene* (Plate 18) there is already clear evidence of the poetic imagination which the artist has transferred to the canvas. The painting portrays the serene bucolic life in a land rich in the gifts of nature. Here the vital sap, so to speak, oozes from the healthy bole, the lush phantom crotons, the lianas and the flowers. Add to this the carefree attitude of the Sinhalese couple, aswoon in the opiate atmosphere of a land where it always seems afternoon.

From the painting *Govindamma* (Plate 17) to *Two Women* (Plate 20) there is a tremendous leap from the naturalistic technique to the fluidity that characterises Keyt's later work. The superimposition of faces and the unbroken contour bring out a continuous rhythmic pattern. There is throughout a calculated economy and an ease which demonstrates the artist's mastery and sure hand.

In 1937 Keyt painted the beautiful *Bathers* (Plate 24). His interpretation of the classic myths of India culminates in the powerful picture *Yama and Savitri* (Plate 25). These are personnages from the *Mahabharata*. Here the suppliant Savitri is seen pleading with Yama, the God of Death. The hot, sombre colours accentuate the theme of anguish and despair.

In 1940 Keyt did the frescoes of the Gotami Vihara at Borella, Colombo. Here we find a return to the typically Indian art of Ajanta and Sigiriya, with the highly ornate and crystalline treatment of form. The figures in these frescoes have a monumental dignity. Keyt's draughtsmanship is serenely confident, and brings out the essentially linear aspect of oriental art. The anatomical delineation of the human figure has a sense of rhythm and a graceful stateliness. *Prince Siddartha's Decision to Renounce the World* (Plate 26) is a fresco charged with the motif of sorrow which haunted the divine Buddha. The frescoes are about 70 inches high.

Then came the Nayika series (Plate 27). These pictures are an admirable blend of modern art with Ceylon's folk tradition. Keyt has succeeded in creating charming, luminous pictures with a singular stained glass effect. The deliberate simplification, redolent of an almost primitive boldness, is in reality a highly complex expression of an elemental theme. One can almost visualise the fury and the delight of the artist as he went on snatching something out of the rainbow to create those beautiful Nayikas.

Even though there is an undertone of sadness and nostalgia in all Keyt's work, the ultimate effect is never depressing. It is, rather, an effect which leads one to sombre reflection and catharsis. Keyt's colours scream not with the calculated intent to shock but to evoke the maximum aesthetic response from the surface where they lie. The violence inherent in Keyt's later work is simply a reflection of a highly sensitive and analytical mind. It would seem that for George Keyt reality is a flux, a process, a ceaseless forming and unforming unto eternity. He must therefore come to grips with this eternal vortex and arrest a slice of it, in order that he may expose it to the bright spectrum of his imagination.

"The vigour and flexibility of the art of Keyt," wrote Martin Russell, "reflects not Europe's return to the humanistic view but the long-sustained love of life, beauty, passion and legend which have almost perennially animated Indian civilization."

For many years Keyt was almost unknown. Then, in 1946, he left Ceylon and came to Bombay. A large exhibition of his paintings was organised by Dr. Mulk Raj Anand and Keyt's admirers in the city. "The exhibition created great excitement and some bewilderment," commented Martin Russell, "for nothing of the kind had ever been seen before."

The exhibition had the impact of a revelation. It jolted the visitors with a thunderclap of colour. Here before them were strange, lovely pictures. They were something dazzling, something beyond their comprehension.

George Keyt had come into his own.

M. F. HUSAIN

FROM the stark objectivity of Amrita Sher-Gil and the tender lyricism of George Keyt we pass on to the utterly cerebral art of Maqbool Fida Husain.

In Husain we find the idiom of modern times, a vast capacity to jolt our perceptive faculties in an attempt to arrest those aspects of reality which keep forever eluding our consciousness. For his paintings have a relentless violence, something not altogether primitive nor absolutely modern, but a complex of traits which amalgamate stark frankness with a soft touch of the imagination.

Far out of the mainstream of the Indian tradition, Husain is one of the few Indian painters who has struck out on a new path. He has discarded all hoary stereotypes and tried to express himself in modern symbols. And since the modern preoccupation is to simplify, we find his work lacking in redundancies which often clutter a work of art with prettiness and cleverness.

Subdued colours, wide areas suggesting spatial and volumetric combinations, lines pregnant with unspeakable violence—these are in short the salient characteristics of Husain's art.

Husain is not interested in a horse as a horse; the idea of the horse, its quintessence, is what drives him to capture the likeness of the animal. He is not interested in verisimilitude, nor has he any desire to ingratiate or to please. Like an image that comes alive gradually on a photographic plate submerged in a chemical bath, the horse or the idea of the horse emerges from Husain's creative consciousness in its spectral form, which later acquires an arbitrary chromatic entity. The final product is thus simply a crystallization of an idea, a bare unadorned thing.

Since the decorative element is altogether absent, Husain's paintings appeal more to the intellect than to the senses. There is throughout a preoccupation with the grotesque. The composition is always static, lacking detail, and in a violently exaggerated form. The line is firm, pure. The colours are dull. Sometimes there are bright spots emerging at random in the total composition, spurting tiny flares of iridescent colour. Animals, trees, houses and human beings are caught in a transfixed stance, in a catatonic state or simply in arrested motion.

Husain's paintings do in general portray the malaise of an age that is floundering in doubt and negative thinking. Even animals undergo internal agonies. Whether a tree, a rock, a horse or a face—they are all life's facsimiles, clamant portraits of the inner restlessness that lacerates the modern mind. Husain's world is sterile and haunting, inhabited by robot-like creatures, phantasmal in form and colour.

After completing his art studies in Bombay, Husain spent some years painting portraits in the academic manner. There followed a trip to Delhi, where he discovered for the first time the precise and exquisite forms of the Mathura sculpture. This was a new world opening before his eyes.

He carefully studied the works of the ancient artists of India and decided to combine tradition with his own native bent. As a young man he had taken a great delight in the myriad shapes and colour patterns of countrymade toys; and later, as a designer in a furnishing establishment in Bombay, he acquired that keen sensibility which can only develop in a milieu of hard plastic angularities. Time passed and Husain, now a professional artist, tried to revive the static existence of man and things. His paintings are glimpses of a reality charged with a ponderous sense of existence.

We discover that the preoccupation with draughtsmanship and the decorative element, which to some extent marked Husain's early work, is gradually being replaced by starkness and a ruthless cerebral interpretation. Colour, once shockingly bright, subsides to lighter, often nondescript gradations. The line becomes rugged, hard and firm. There appears to exist no conscious method in the composition, the shapes are flung on the canvas with a deliberate unconcern for tradition. All this happens from 1953.

Colour dominates everything. But now the colour is subdued. It piles up volume on volume, and altogether lacks emotional content. And beyond this exterior of deliberate bluntness there lies something provocative, something that excites us to ask why it had to be so. Why? There is no answer.

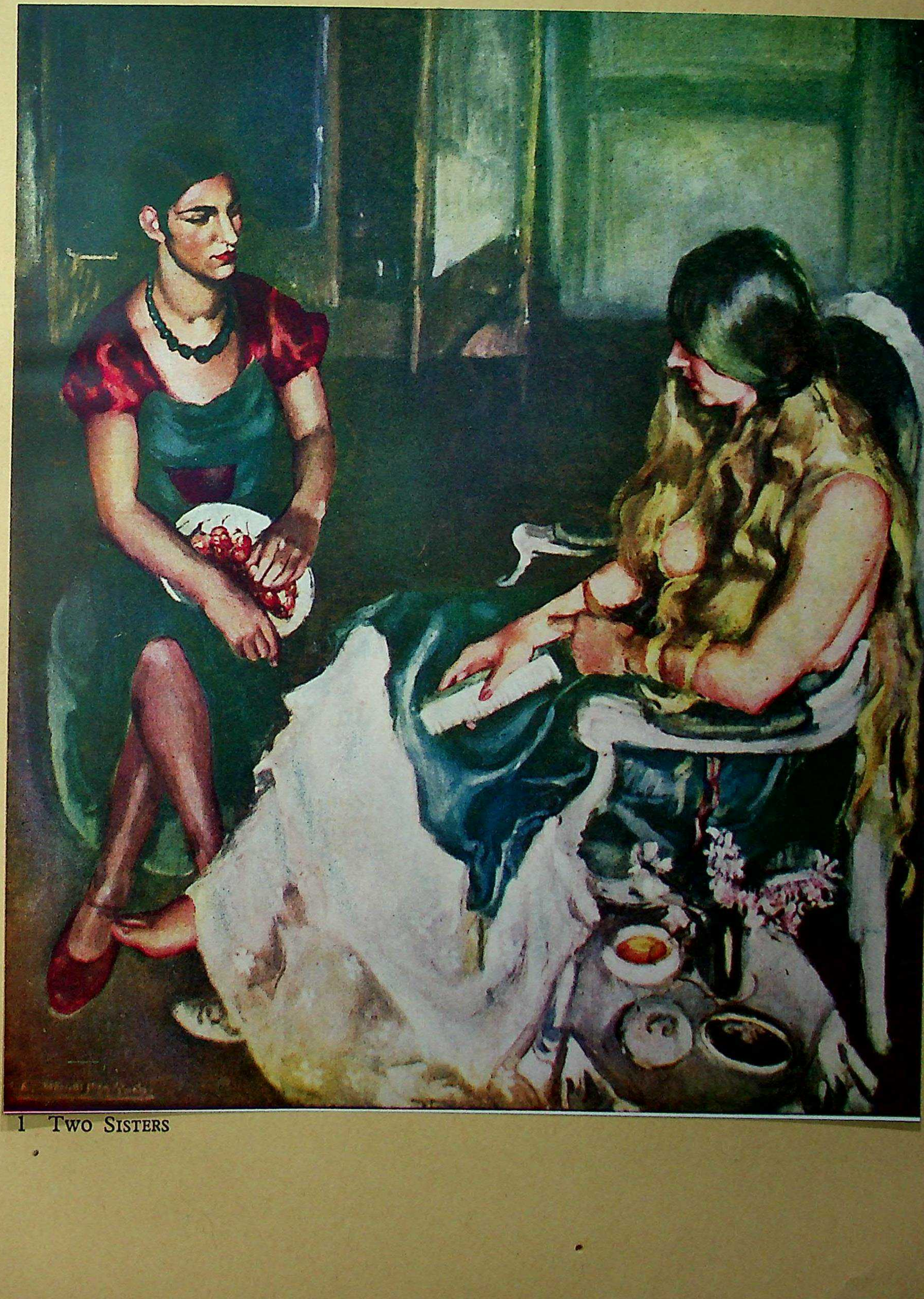
Recognition has come to Husain slowly. It took years for the public to grasp the individualism in Husain's paintings. So far he has had six one-man shows and has participated in the Venice Biennale. In 1959 he was awarded an international award at the Tokyo International Exhibition.

Besides his paintings, Husain has also done a few outstanding murals. His murals adorn the offices of an airline at Zurich, Prague and Hong Kong. The emphasis in the murals is on the whole composition rather than on the constituents.

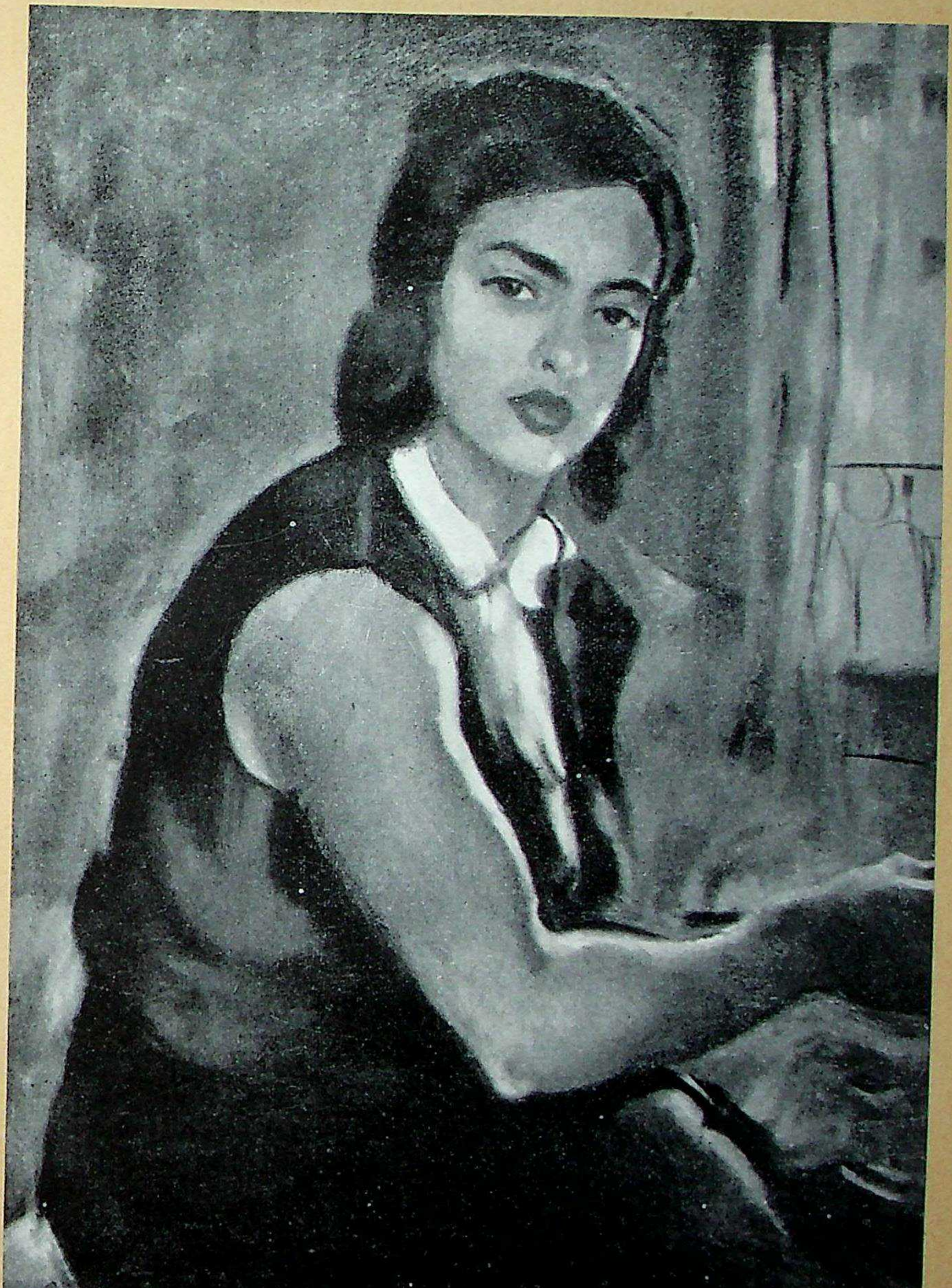
Husain likes to quote E. M. Forster in discussing his recent work. He says: "I don't believe in beliefs. Lord help me in my disbelief."

"I don't plan my pictures," he explains. "They simply flow out of my system according to the mood and the state of my mind. I feel I could go on painting for ever . . ."

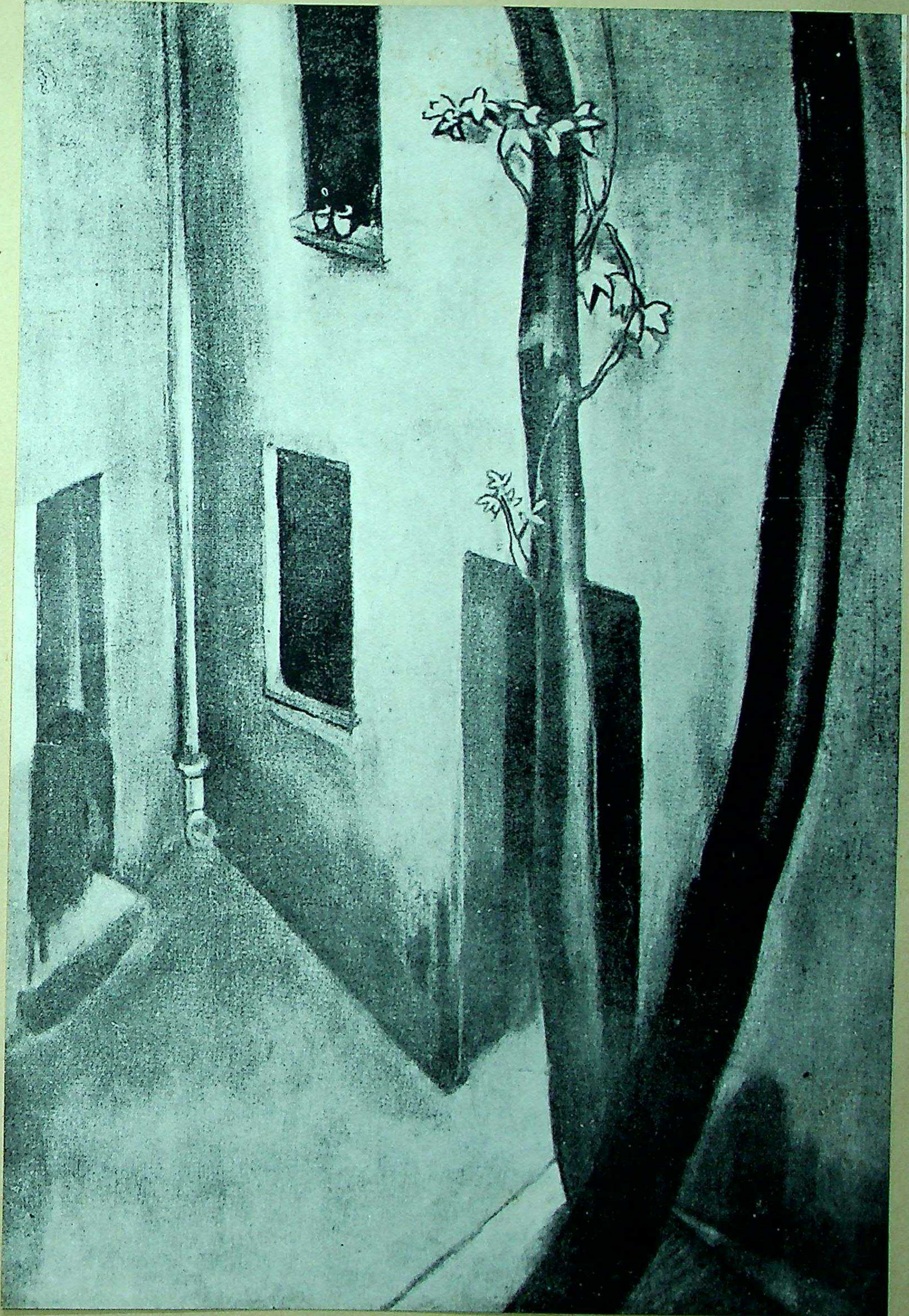
I must finally say that Husain's art is the art of power. Like Everest, it is there. It exists for its own sake, whether one likes it or not.



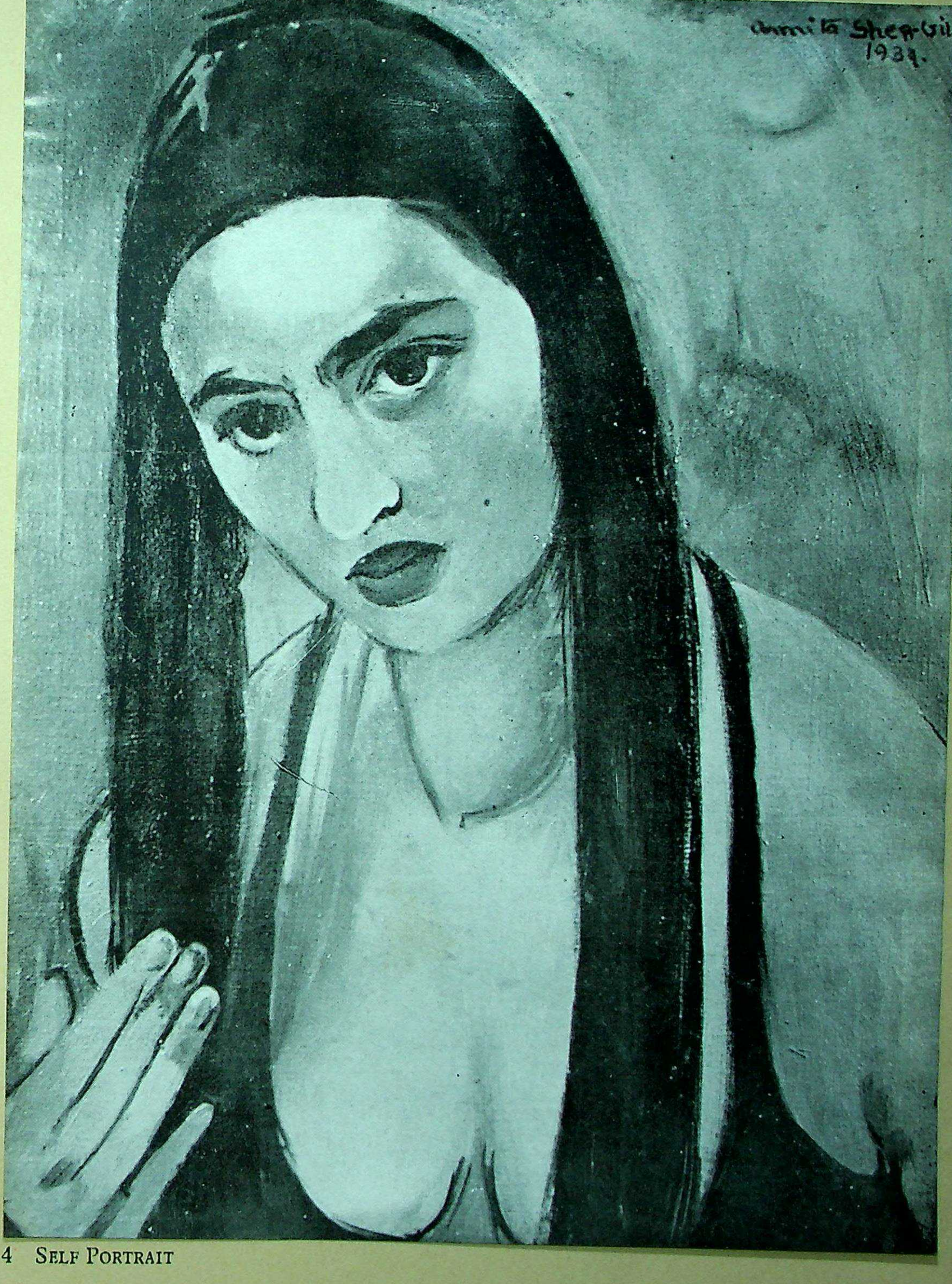
1 Two Sisters



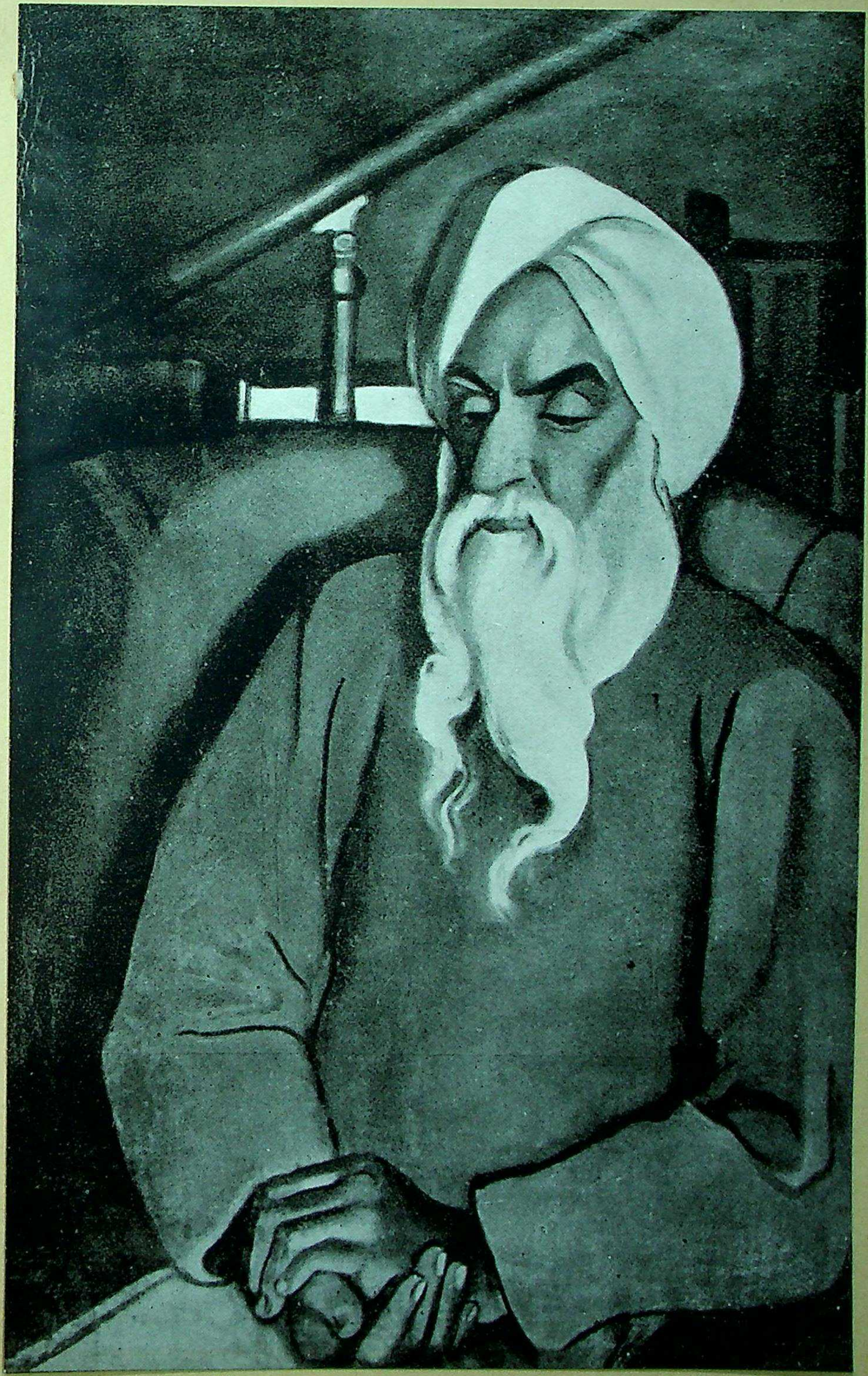
2 SELF PORTRAIT



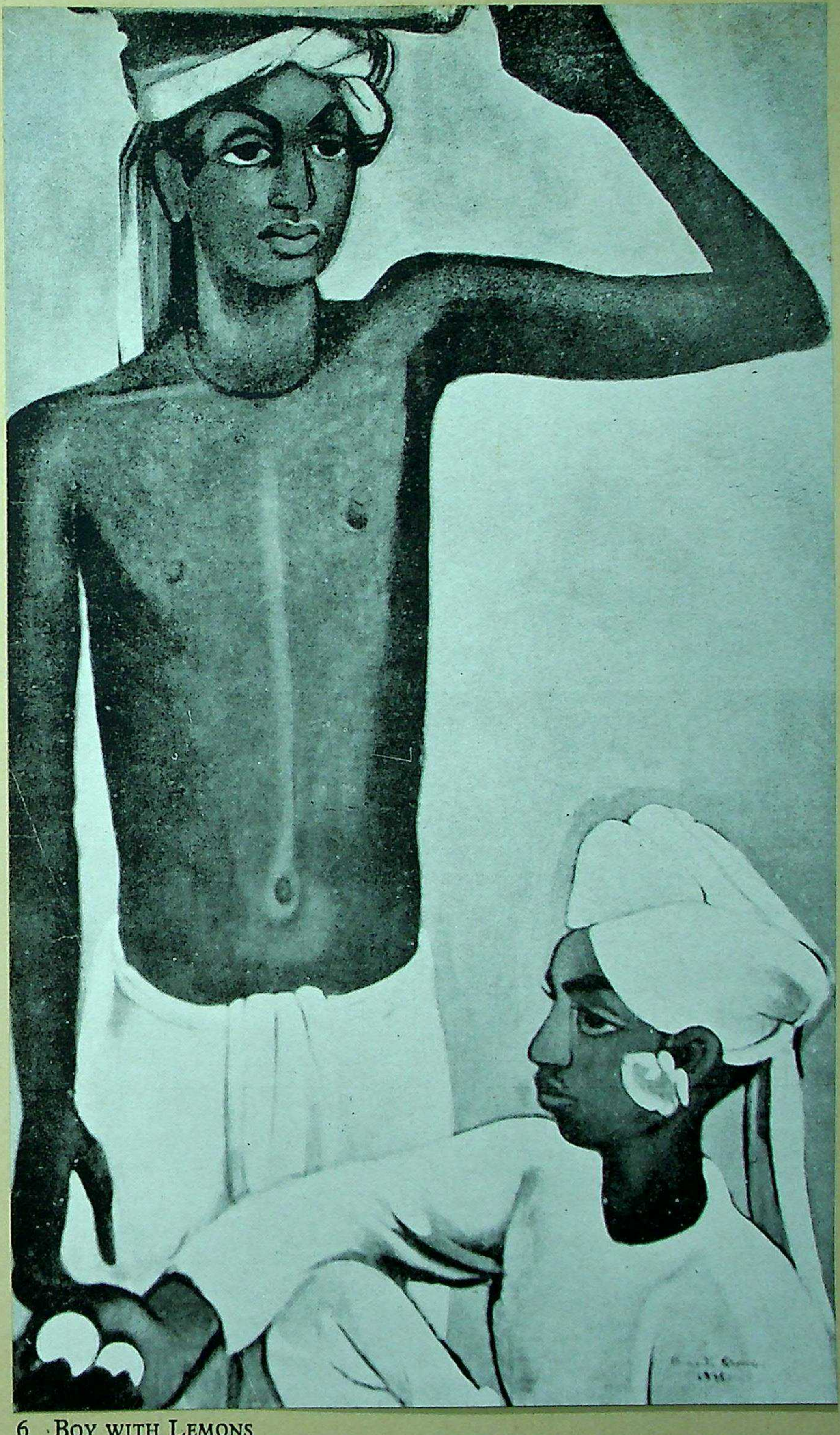
3 Courtyard of my Paris Studio


Amrita Sher-Gil
193?.

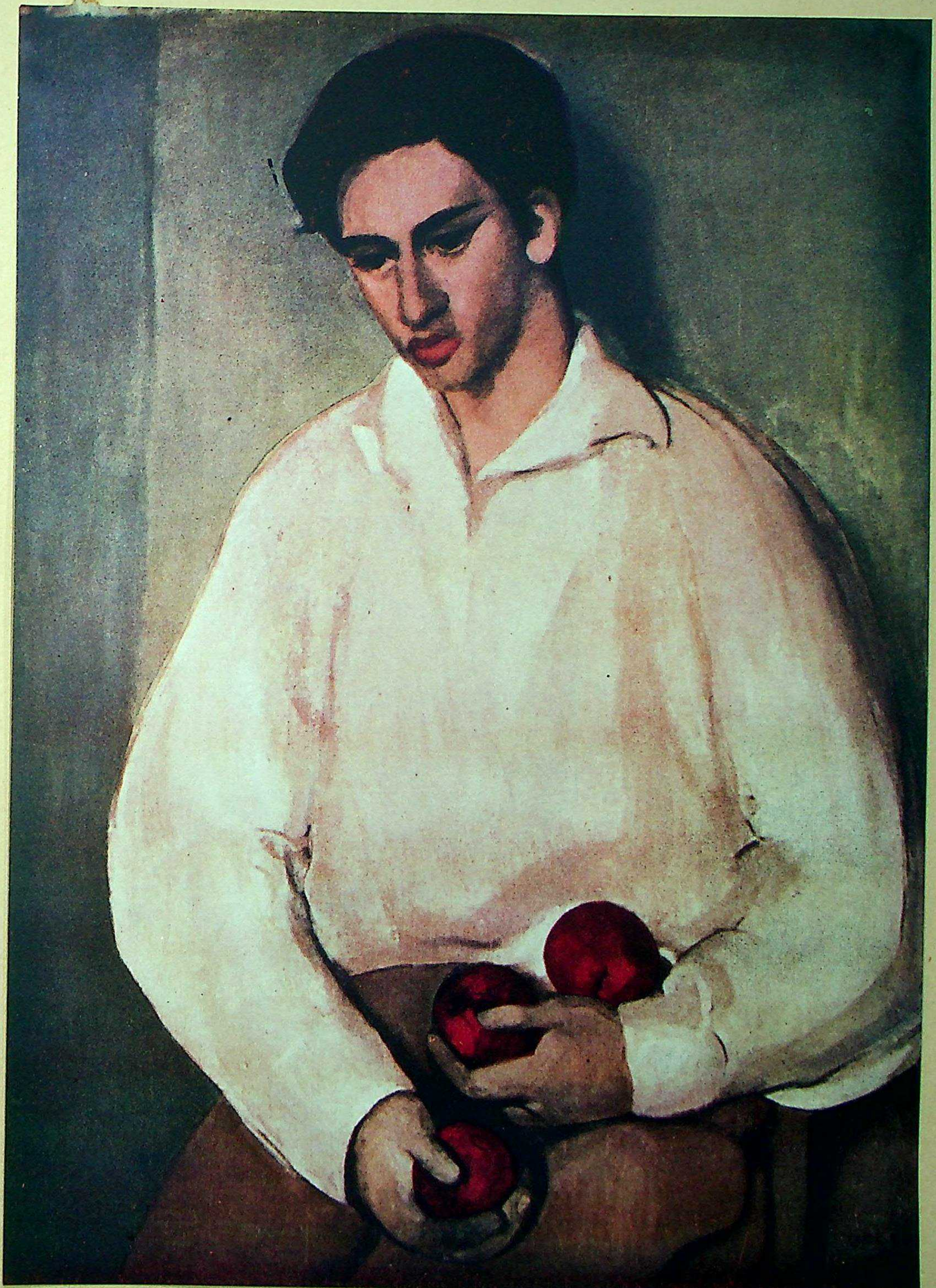
4 Self Portrait



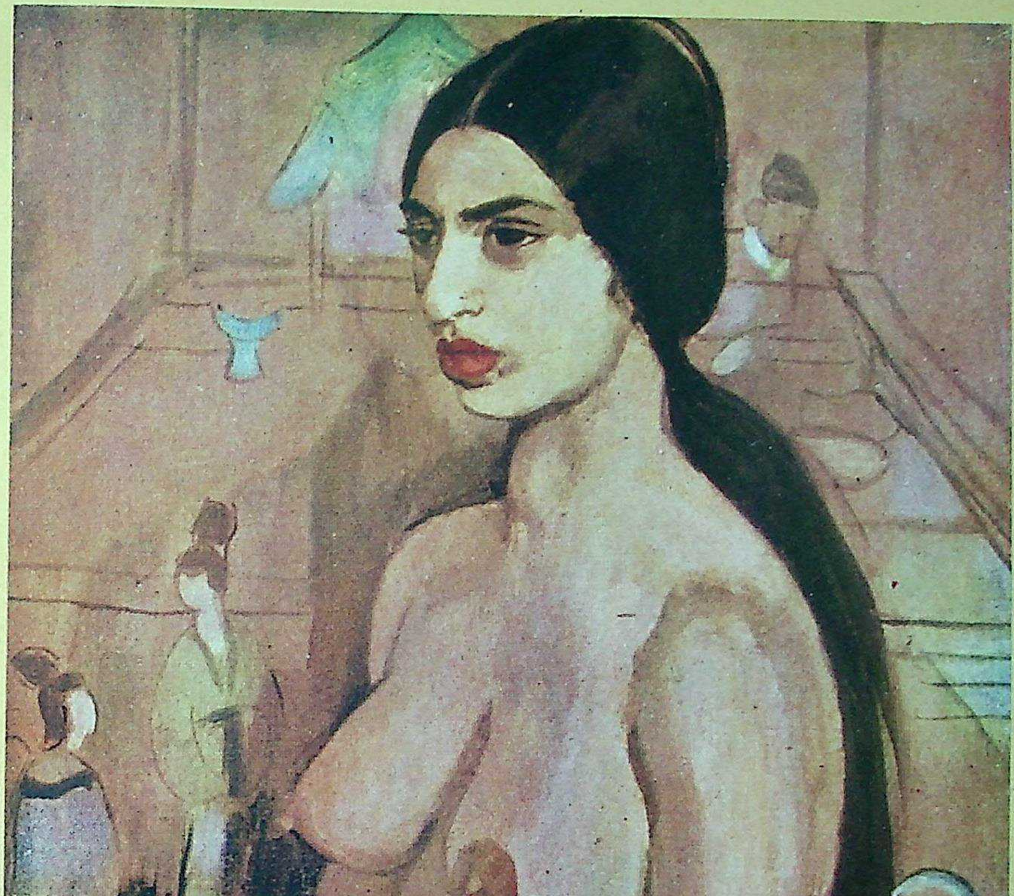
5 PORTRAIT OF MY FATHER



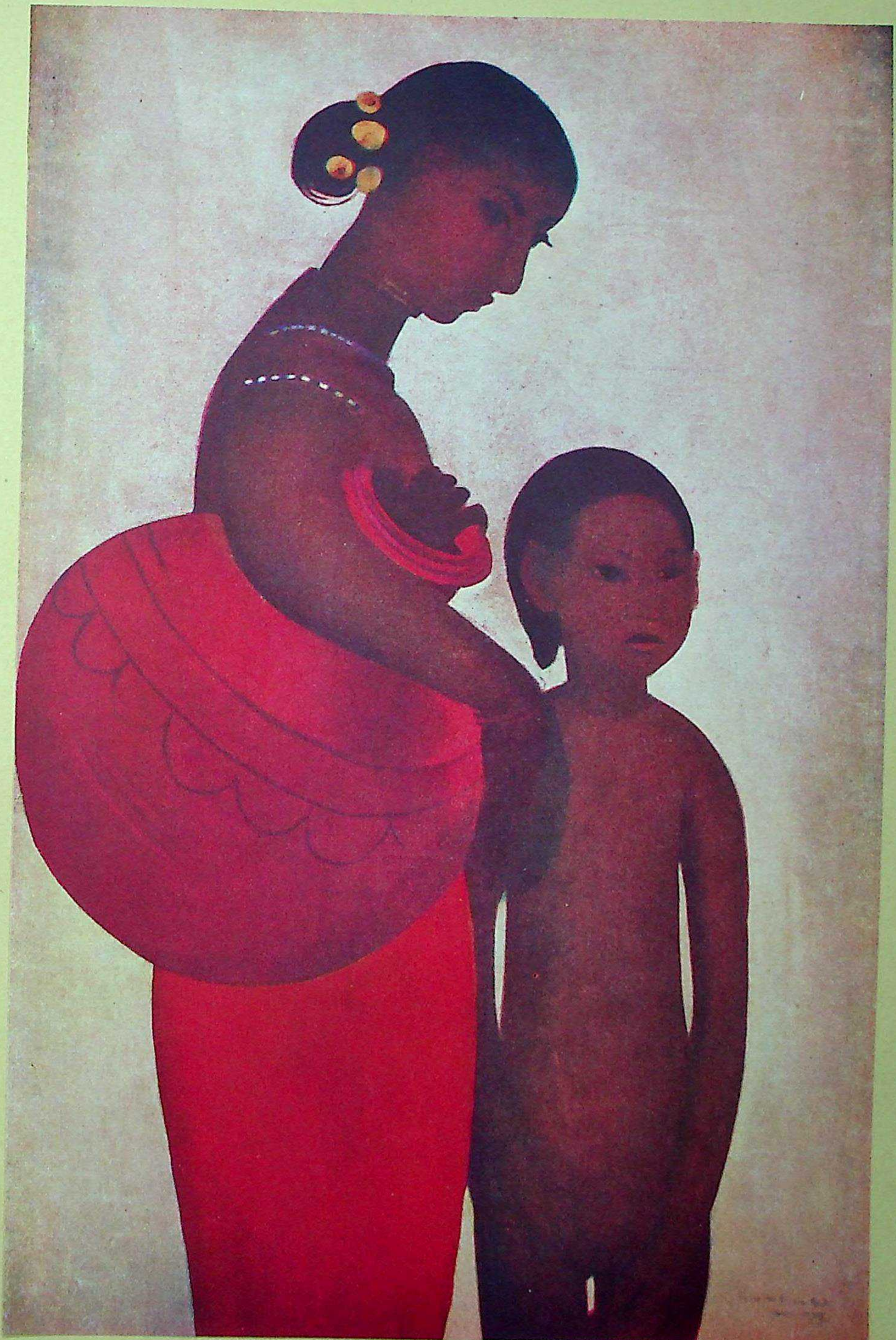
6 Boy with Lemons



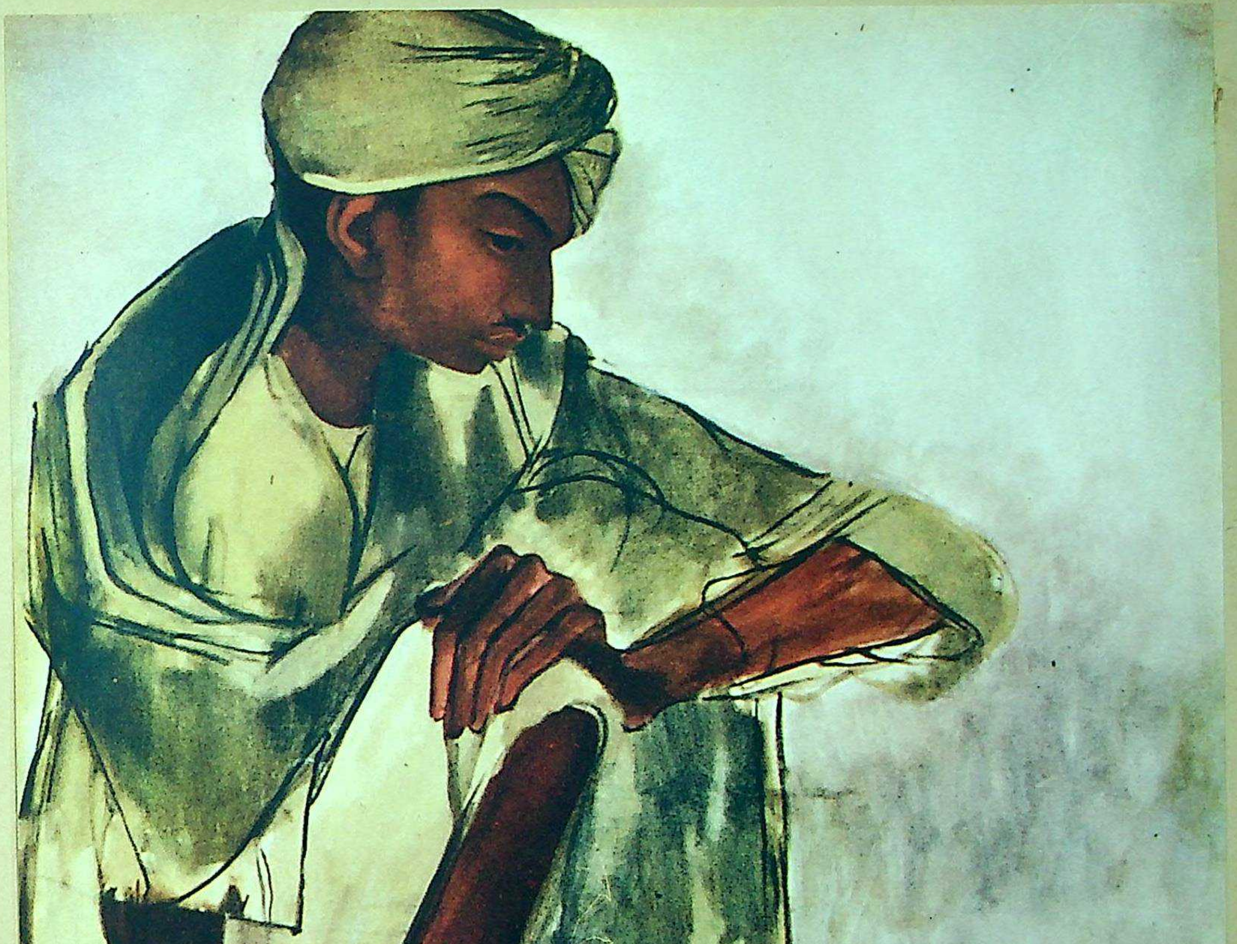
7 Boy with Apples



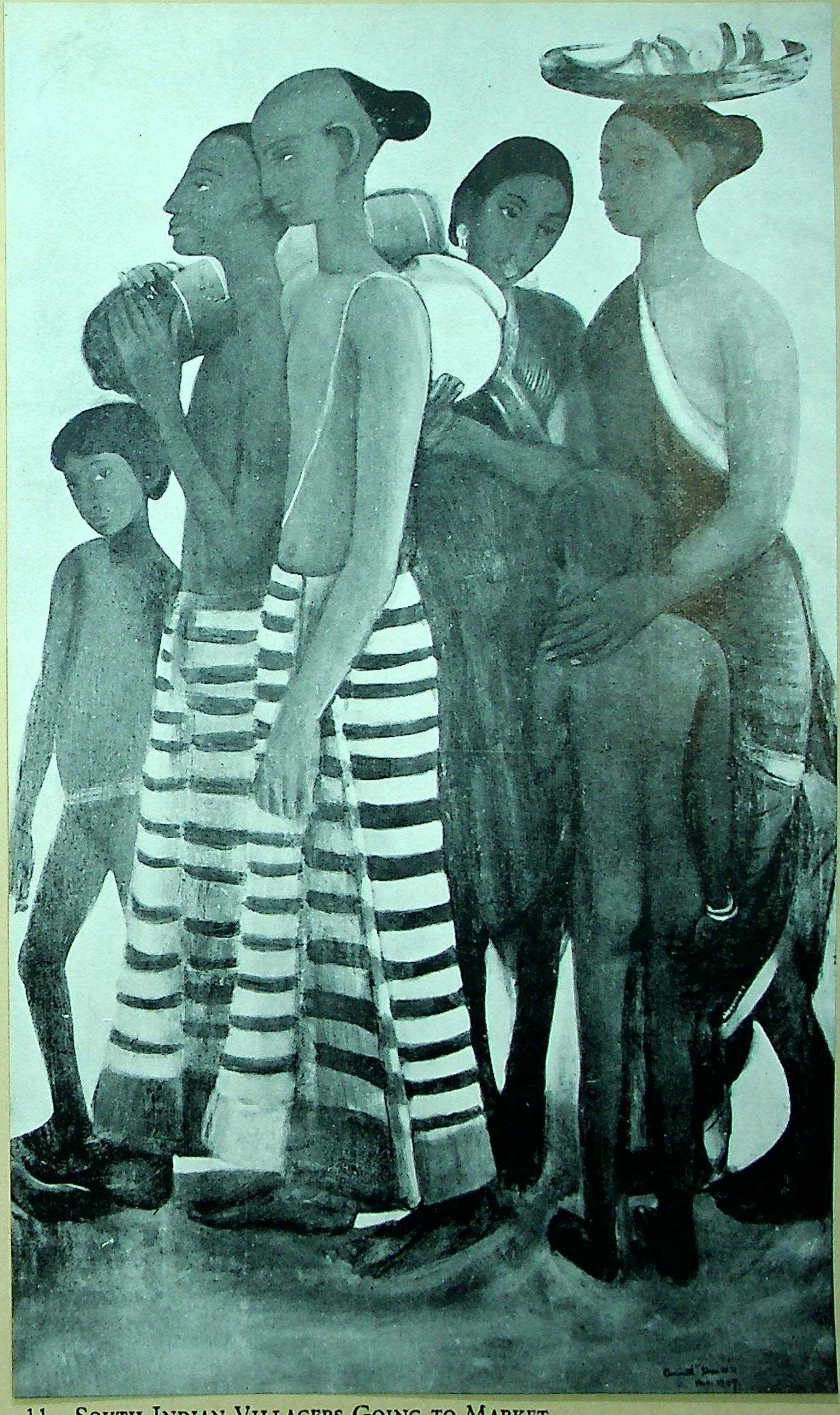
8 Tahitian Girl



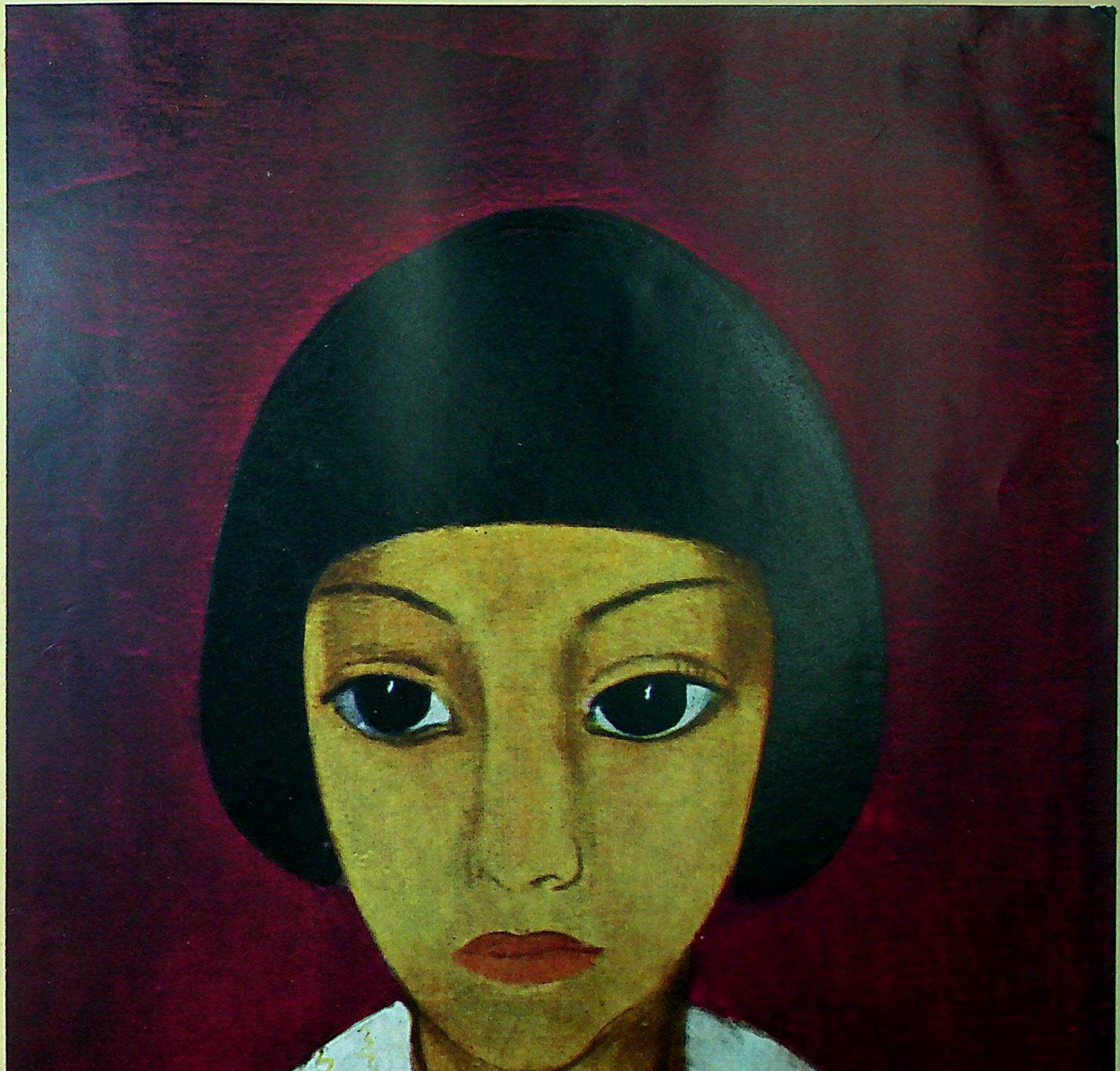
9 To the Village Well



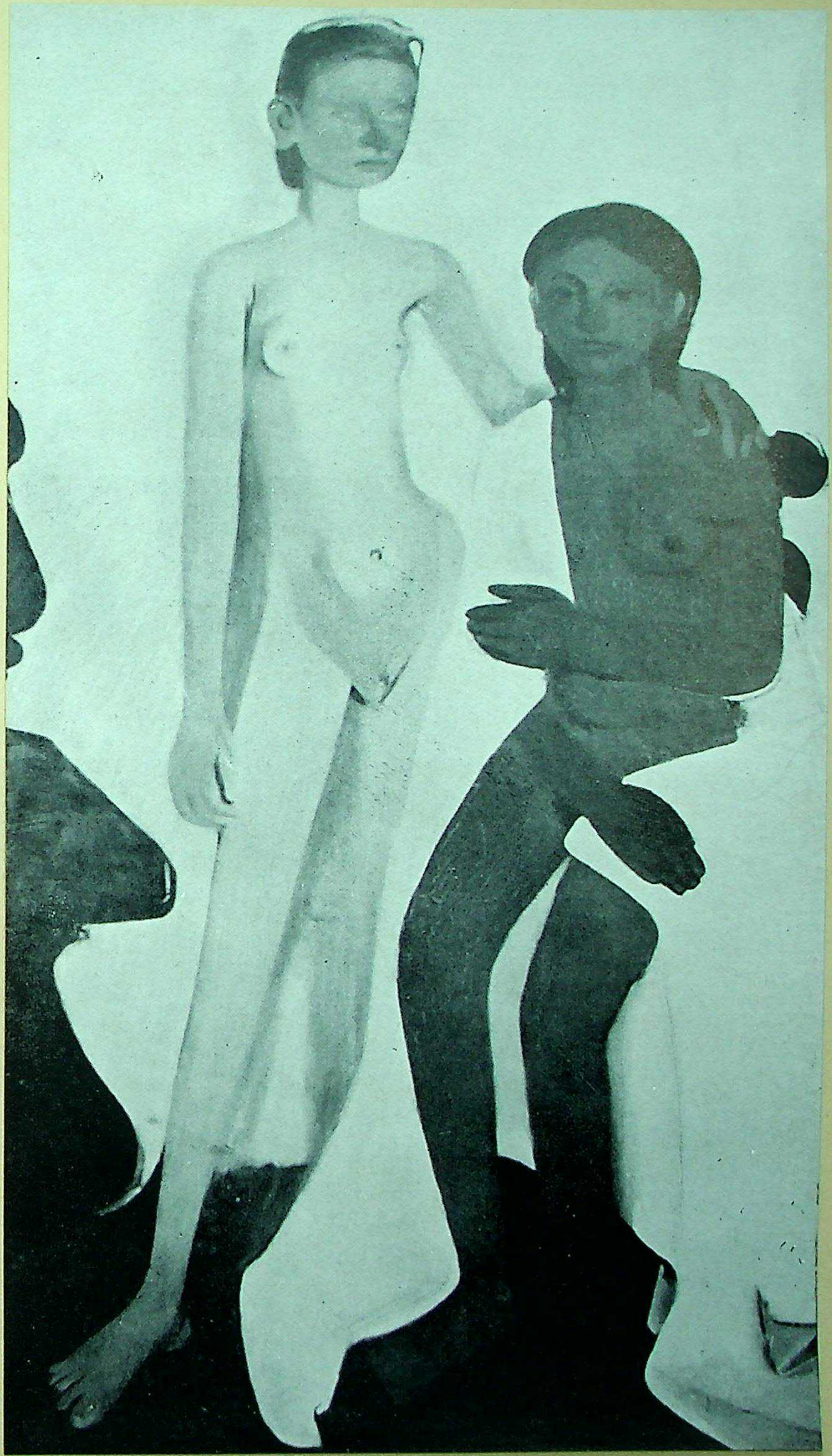
10 INDIAN BOY



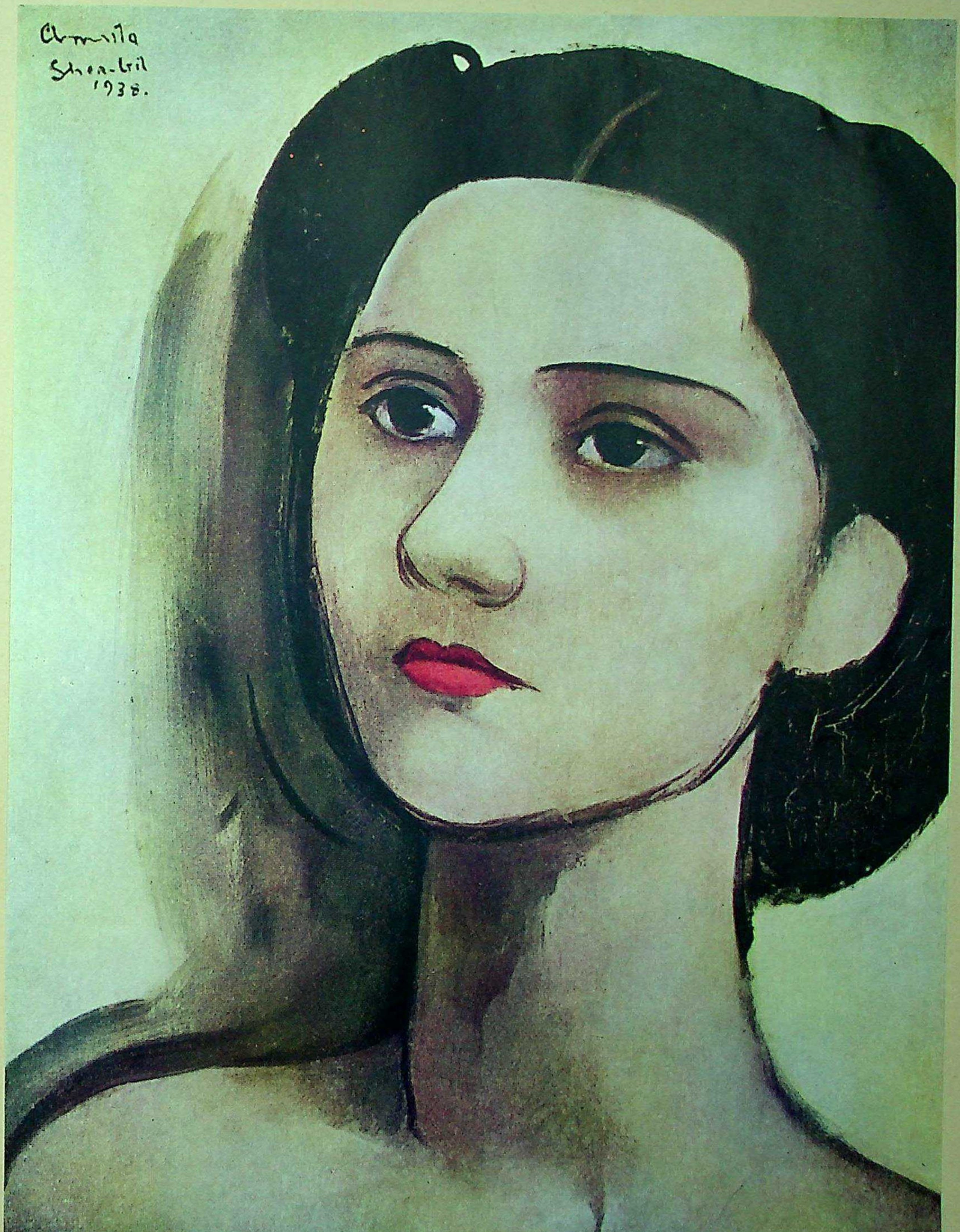
11 South Indian Villagers Going to Market



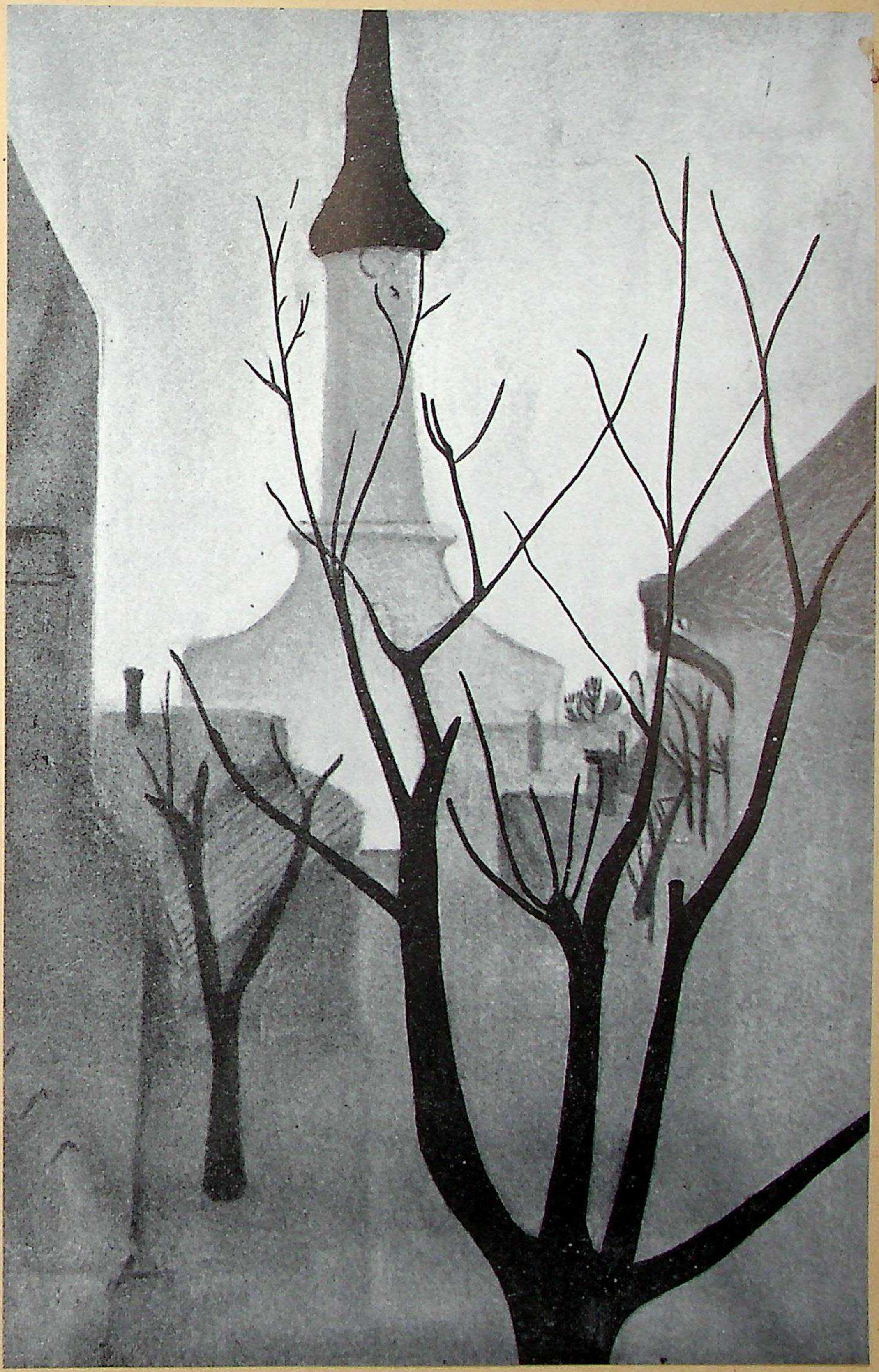
12 Portrait of a Little Girl



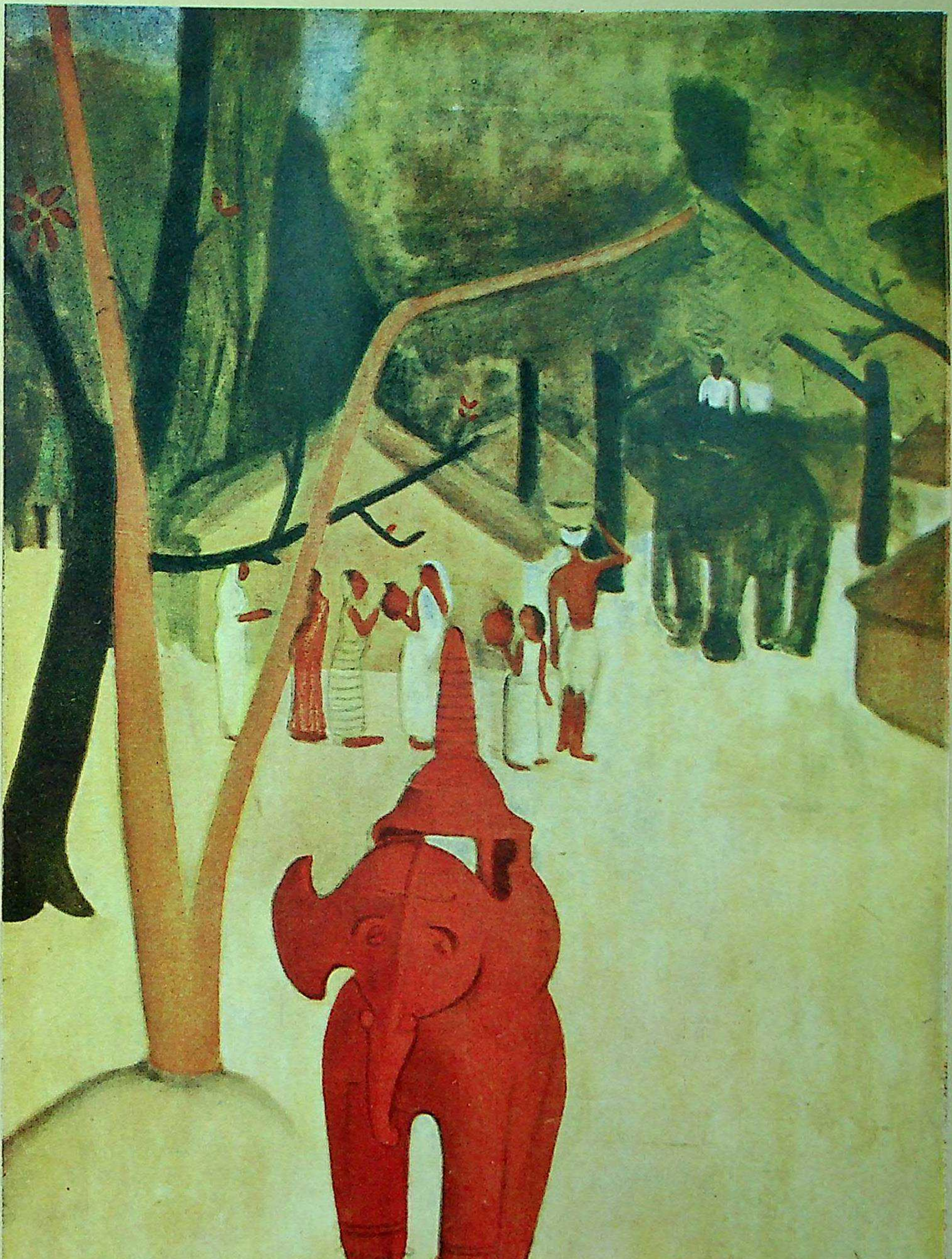
13 Two Girls


Amrita
Sher-Gil
1938.

14 PORTRAIT OF MRS. CHAMAN LAL

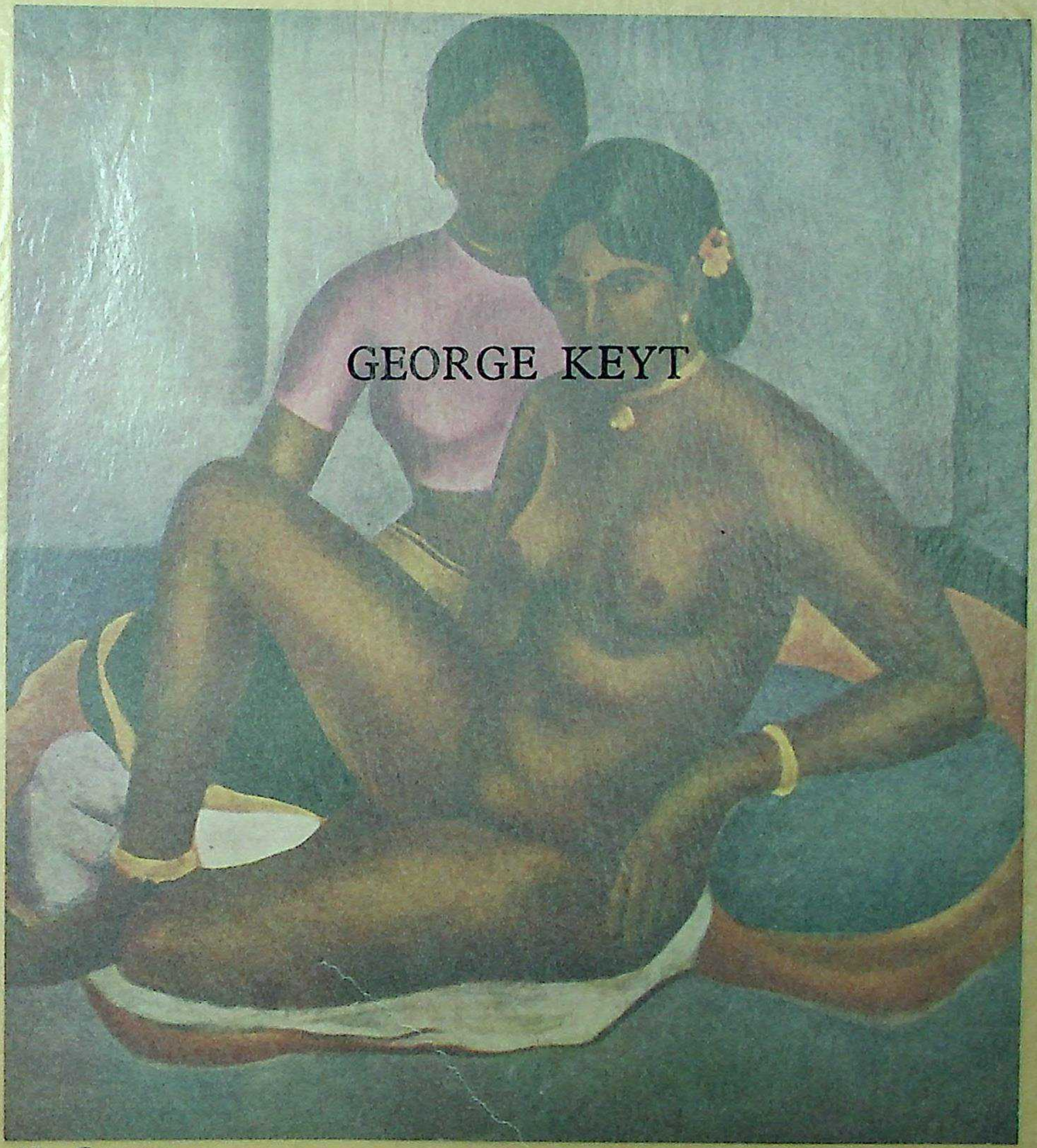


15 Hungarian Village Church

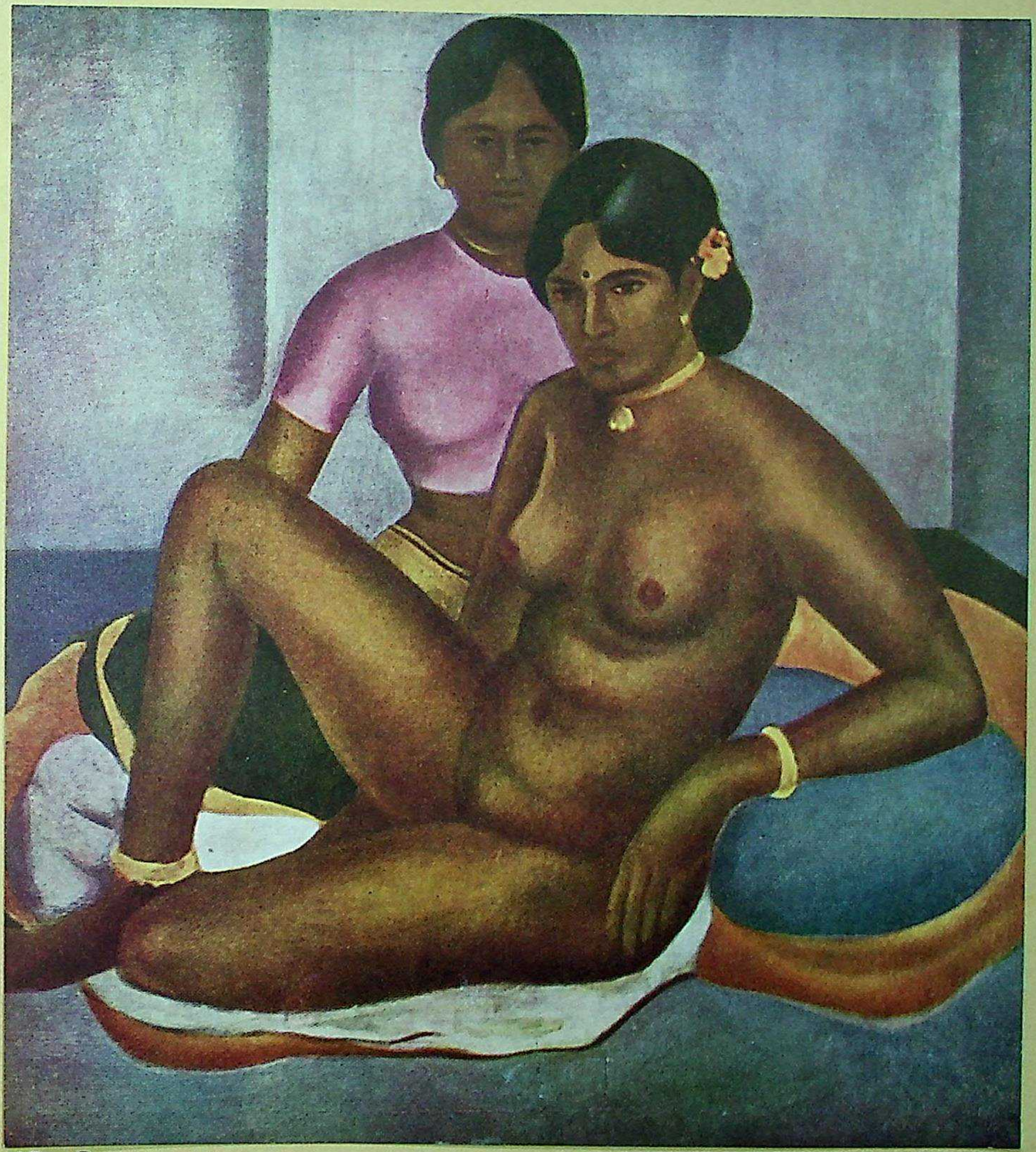


16 RED CLAY ELEPHANT

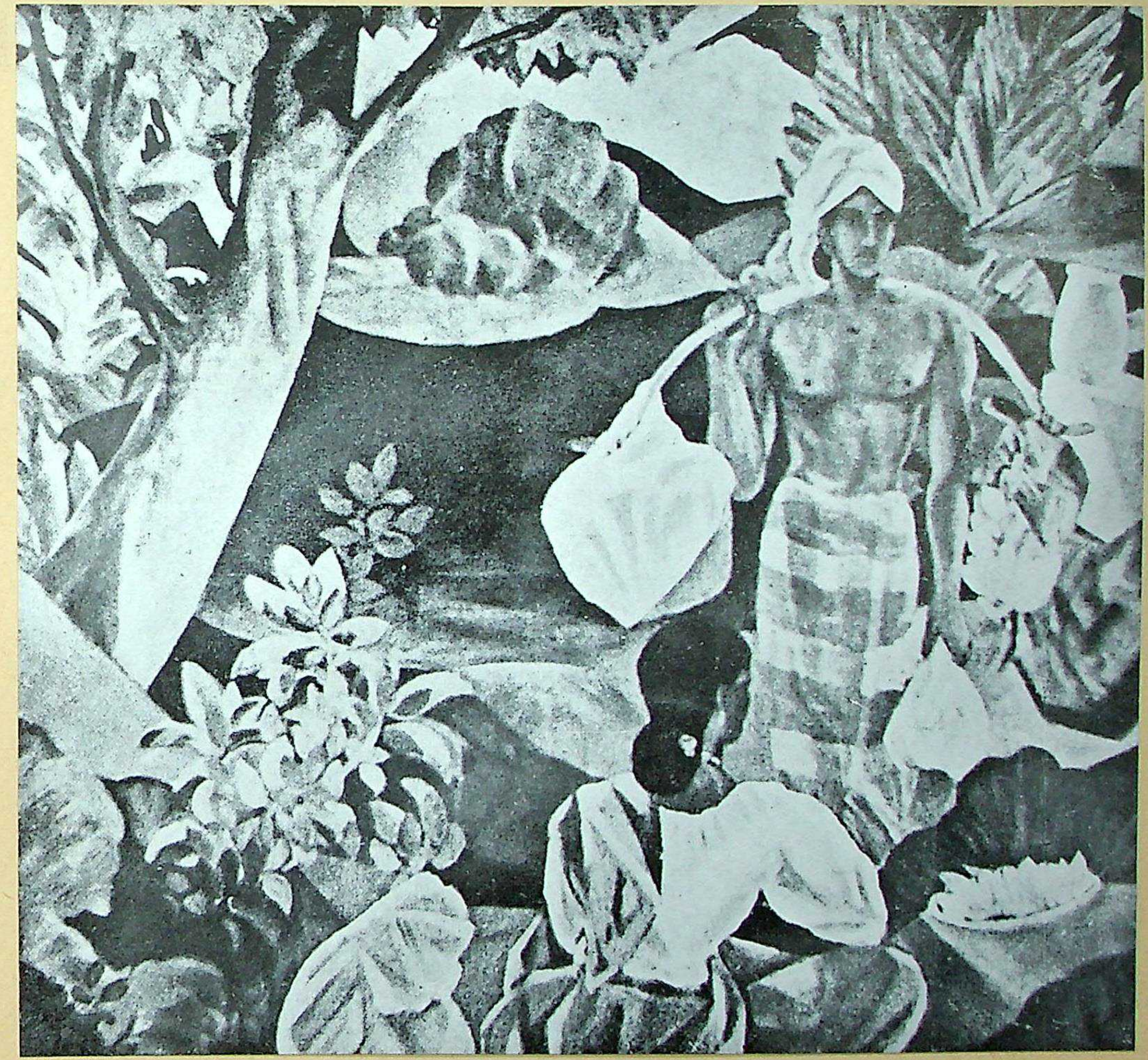
GEORGE KEYT



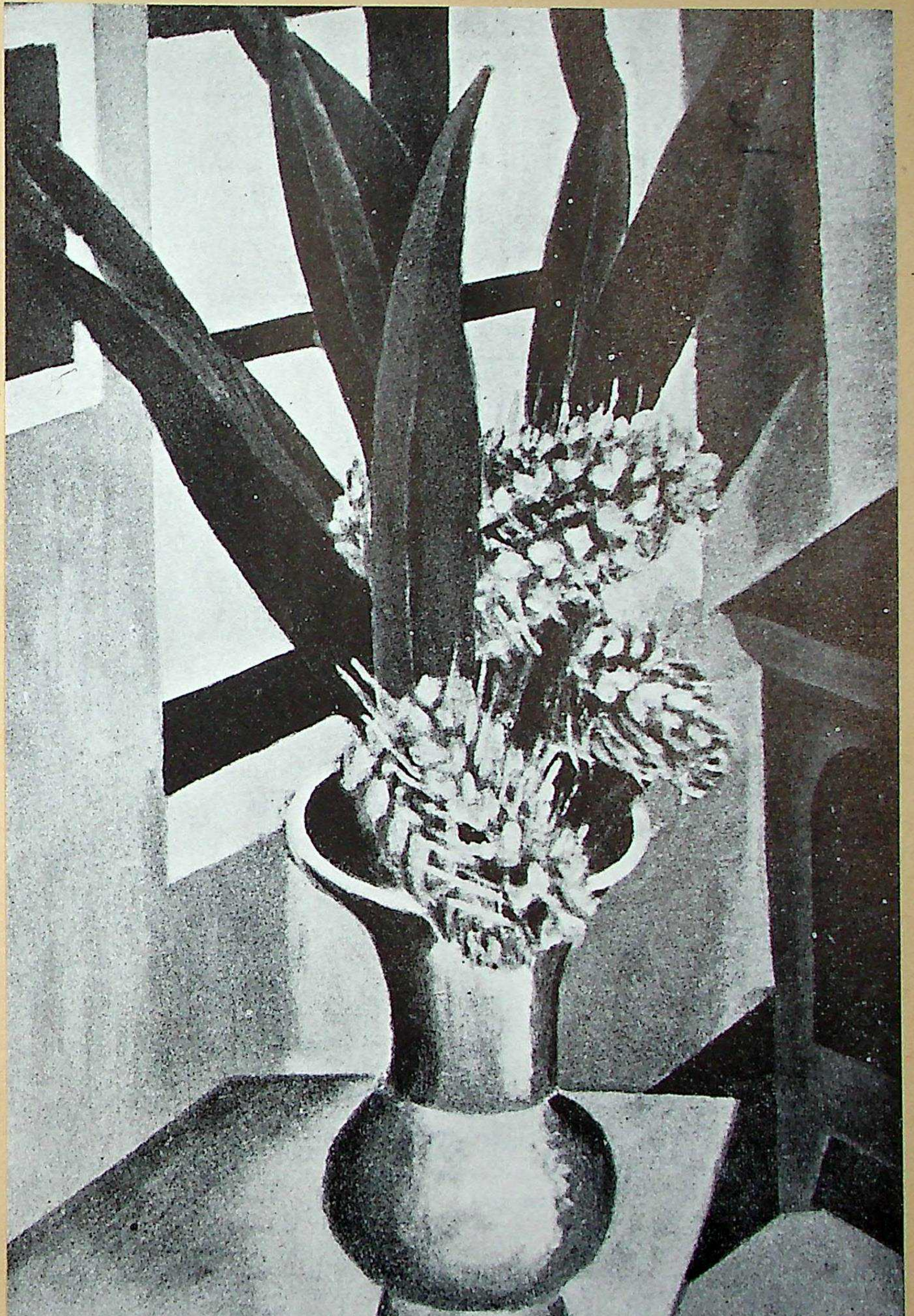
17 Govindama



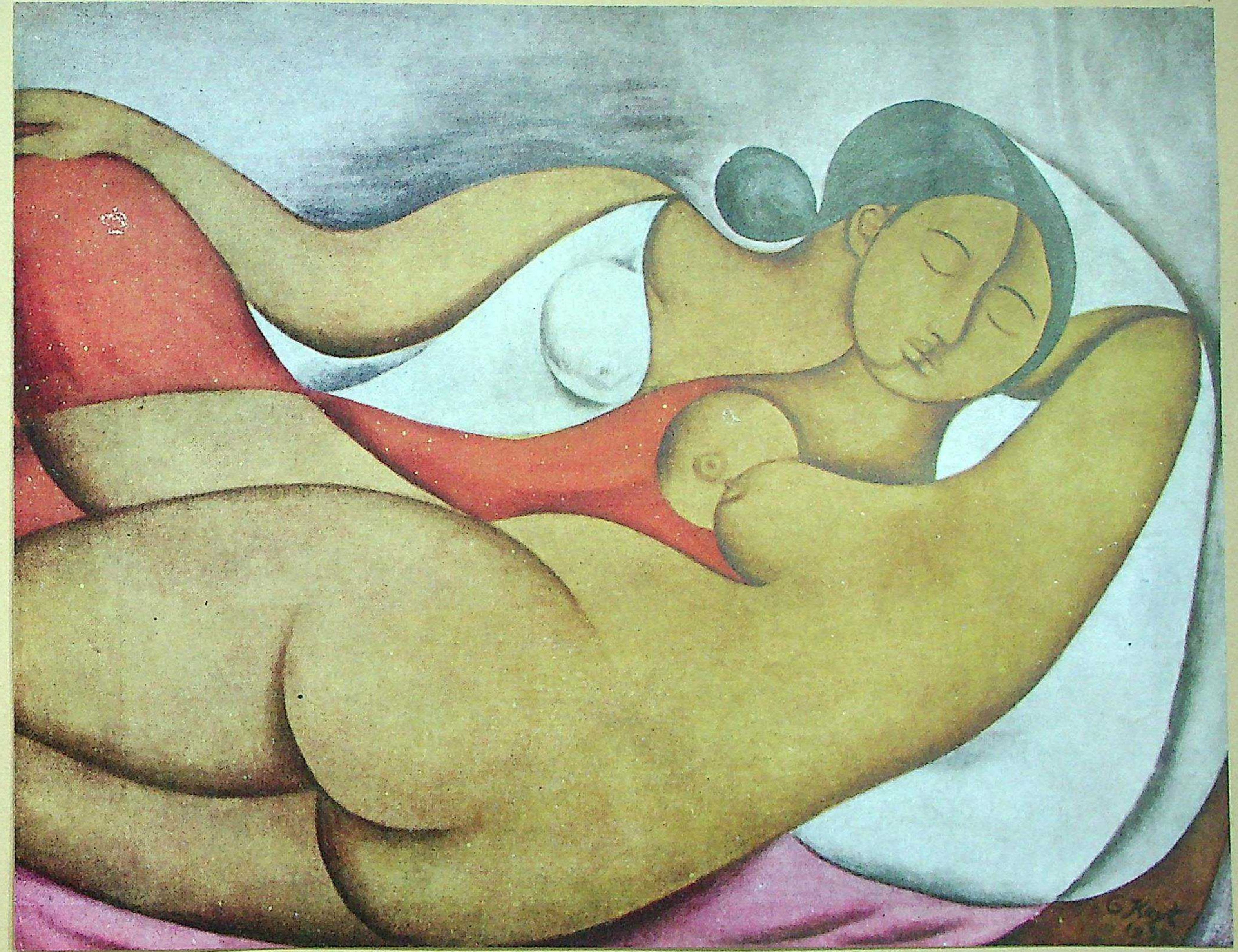
17 GOVINDAMA



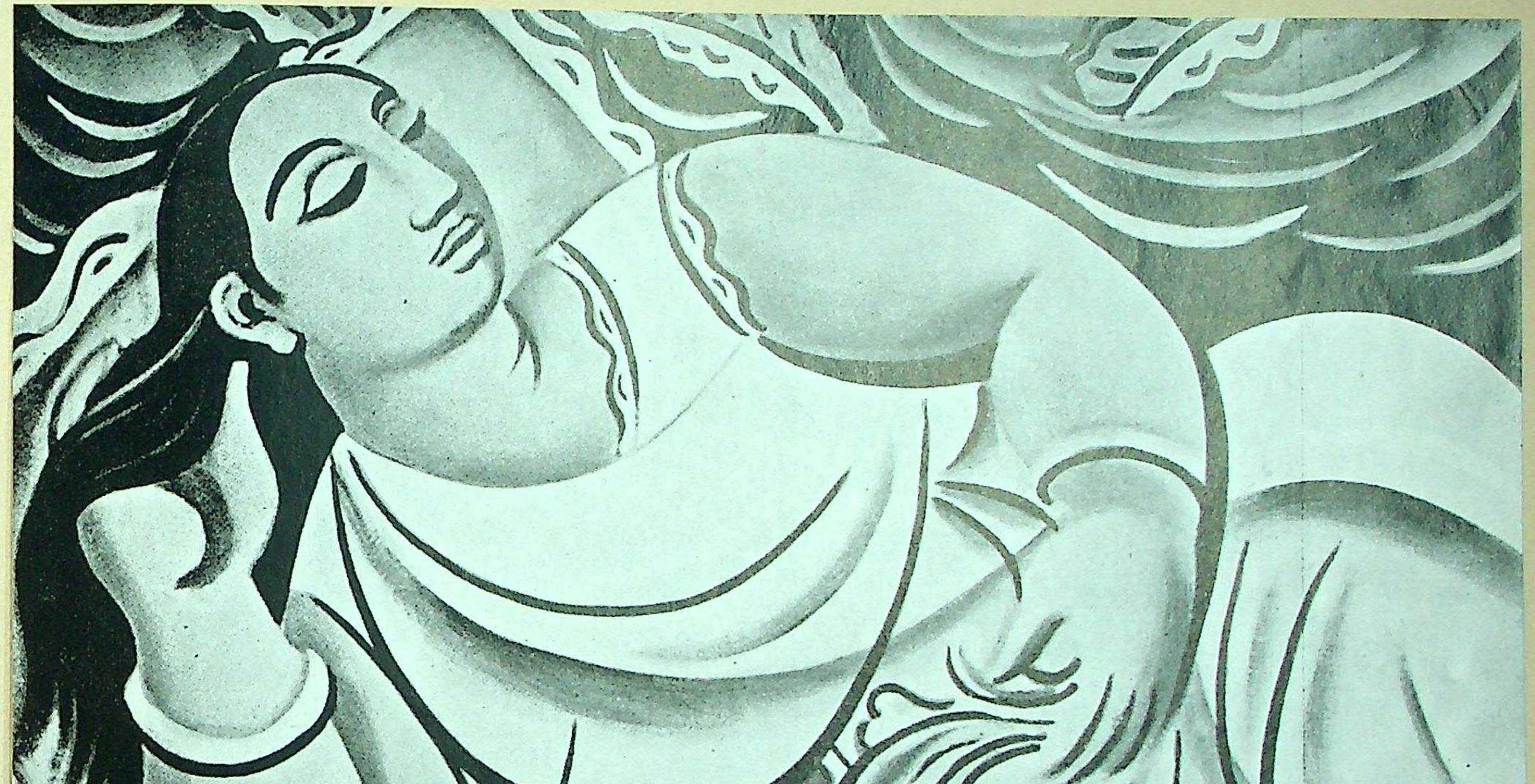
18 Kandyan Scene



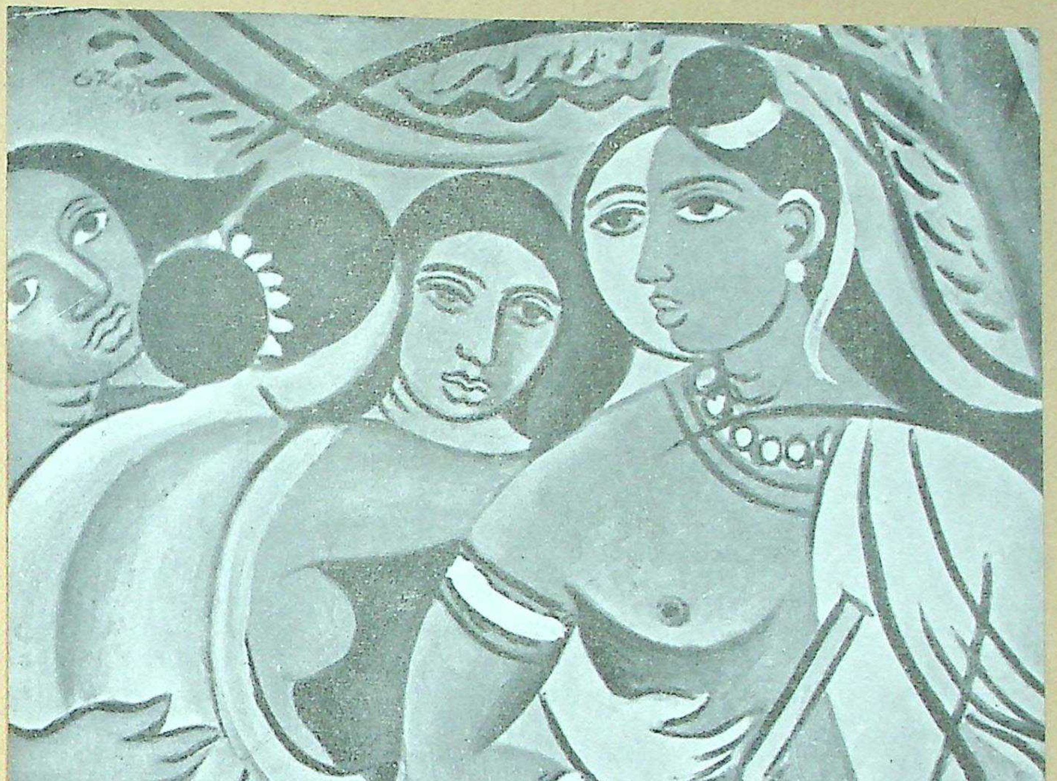
19 BALUDENDU FLOWERS



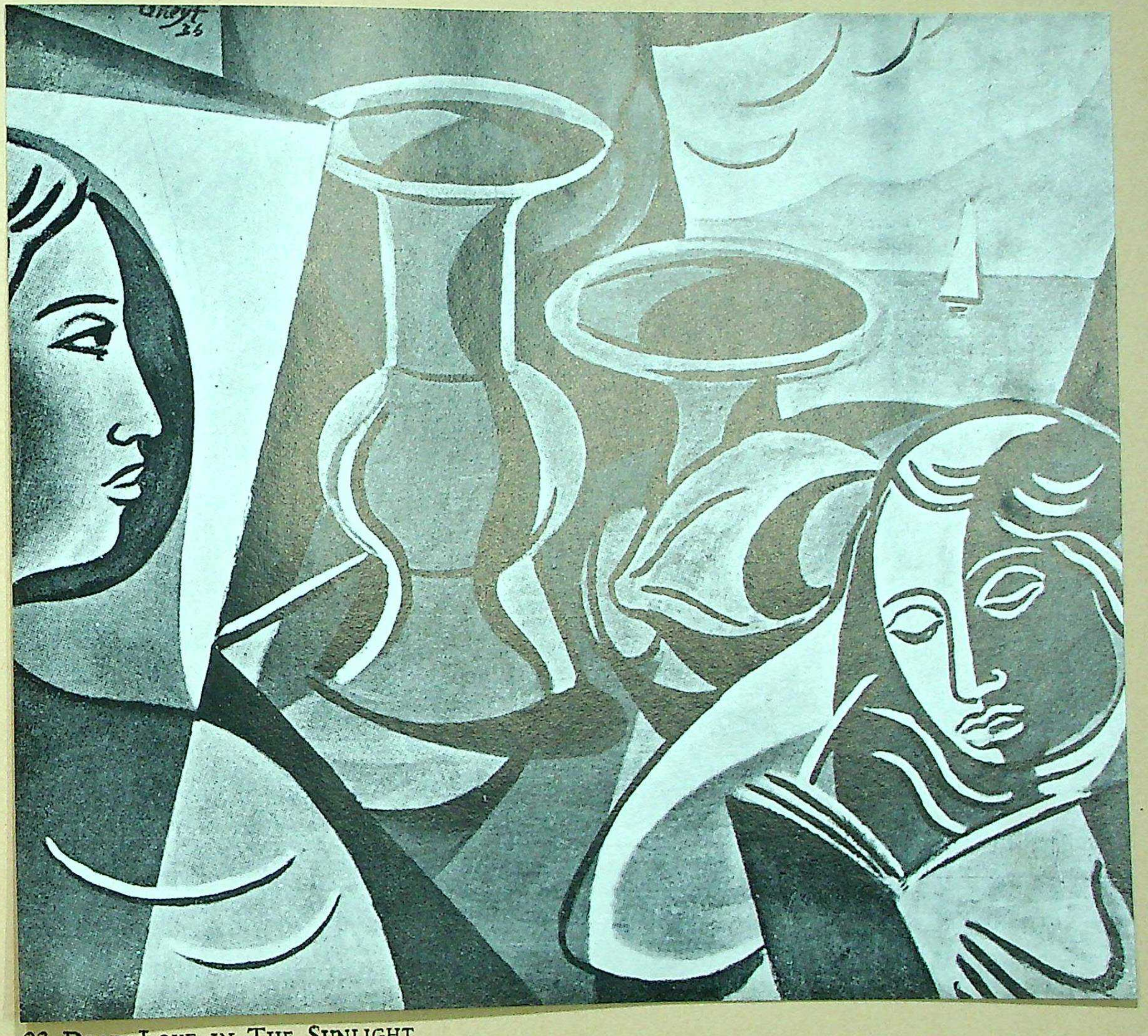
20 Two Women



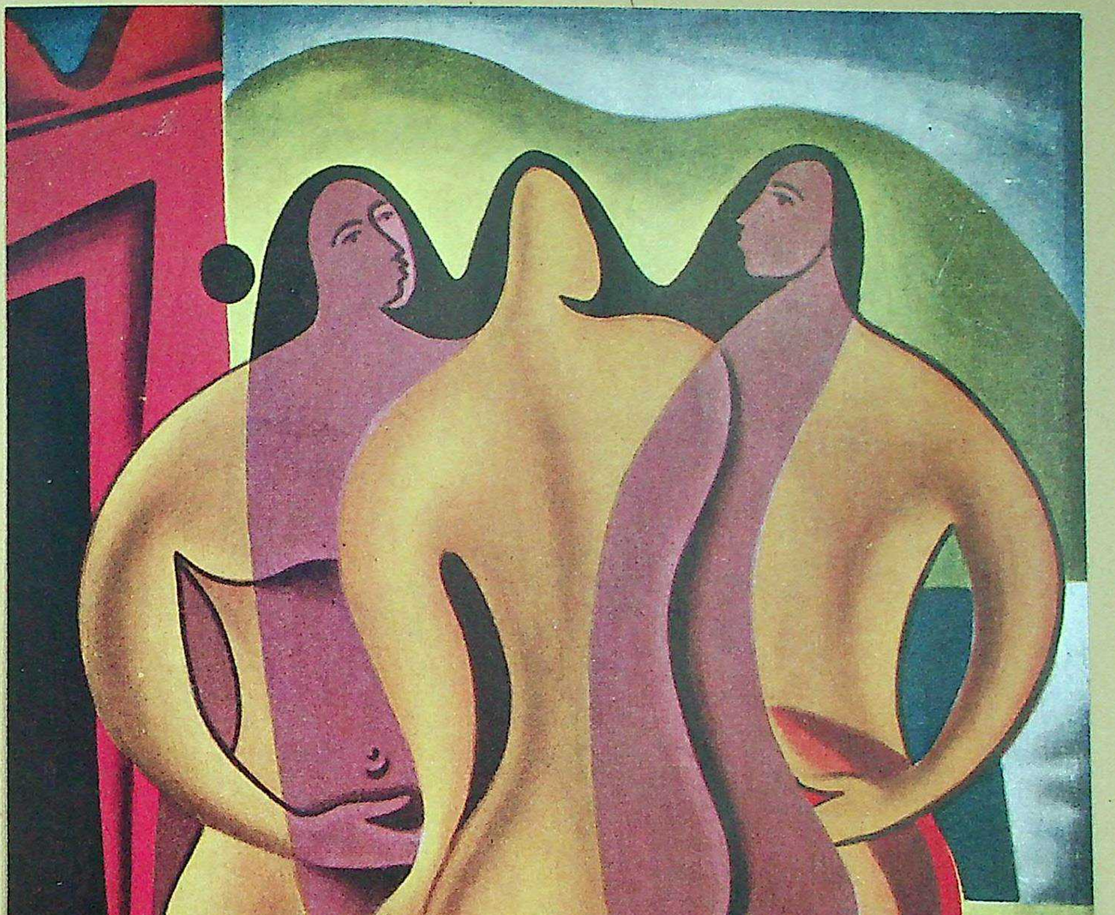
21 THE BALM OF ABSENCE



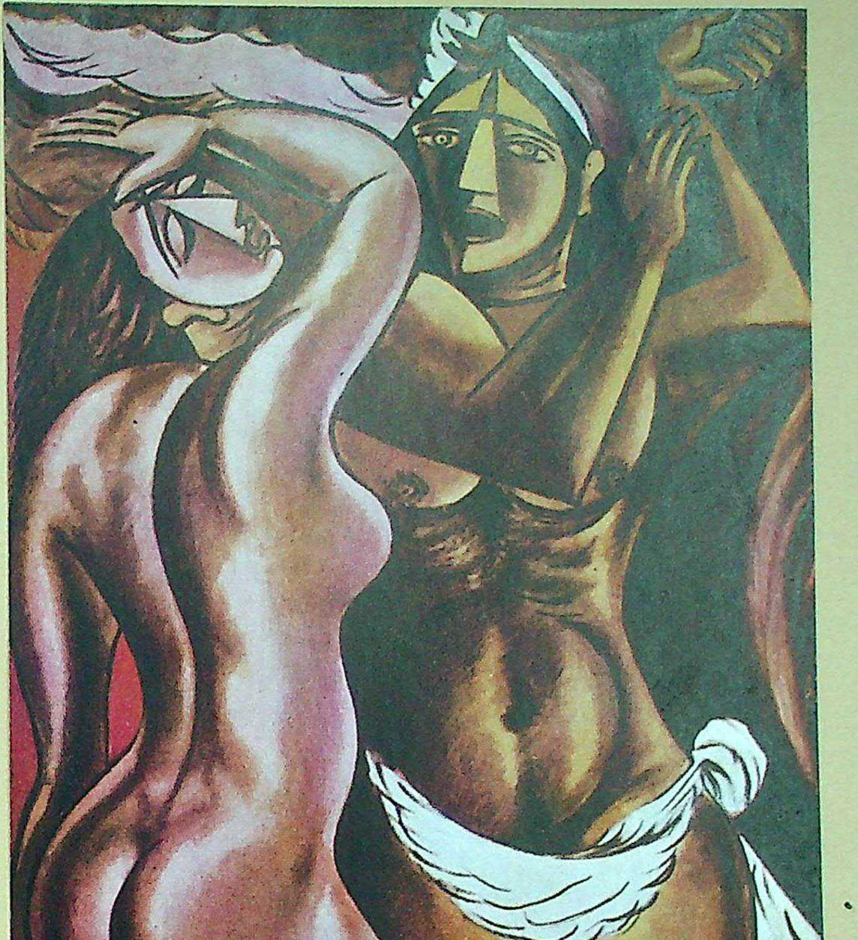
22 Sri Krishna and the Gopis



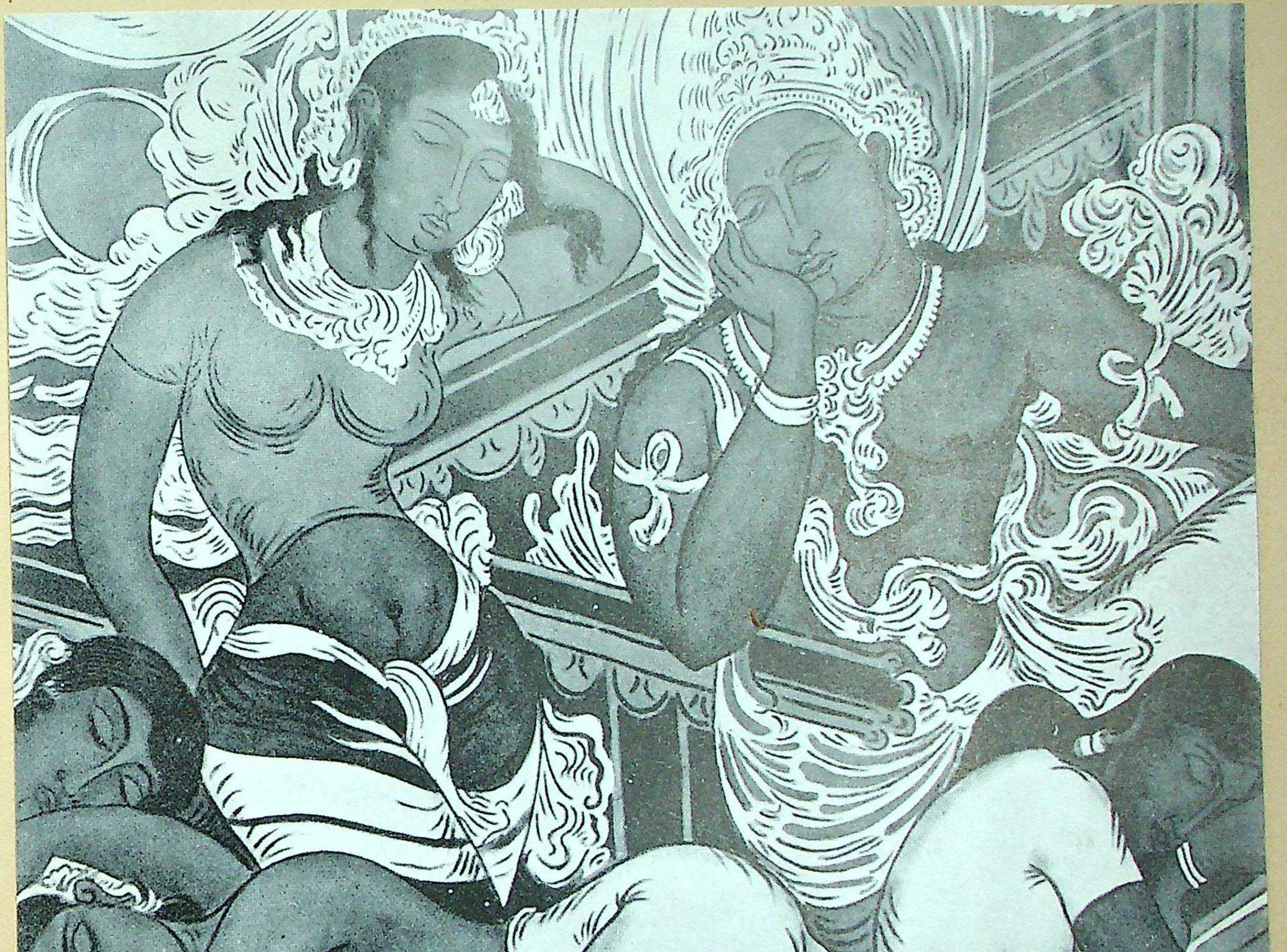
23 DEAD LOVE IN THE SUNLIGHT



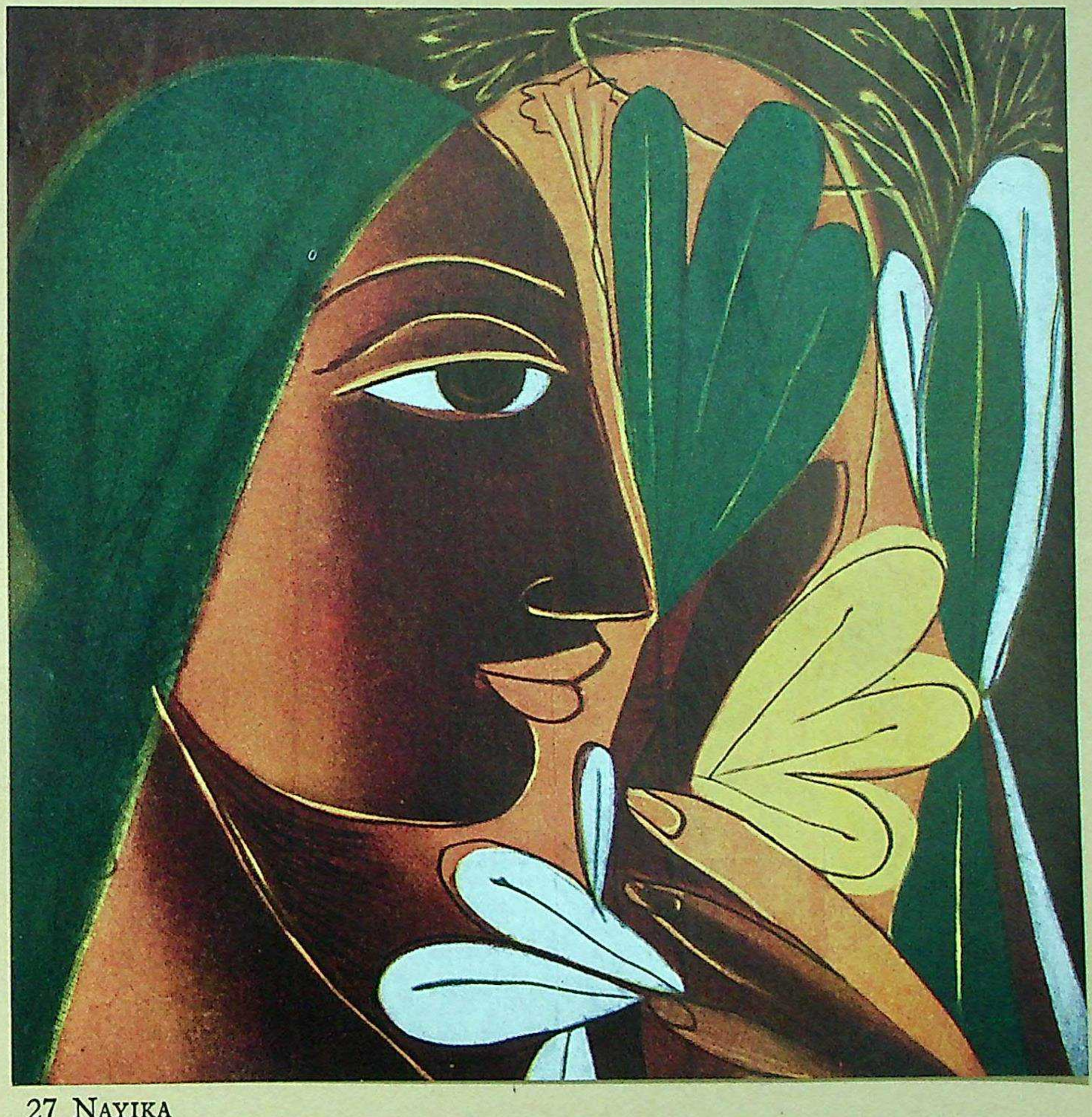
24 The Bathers



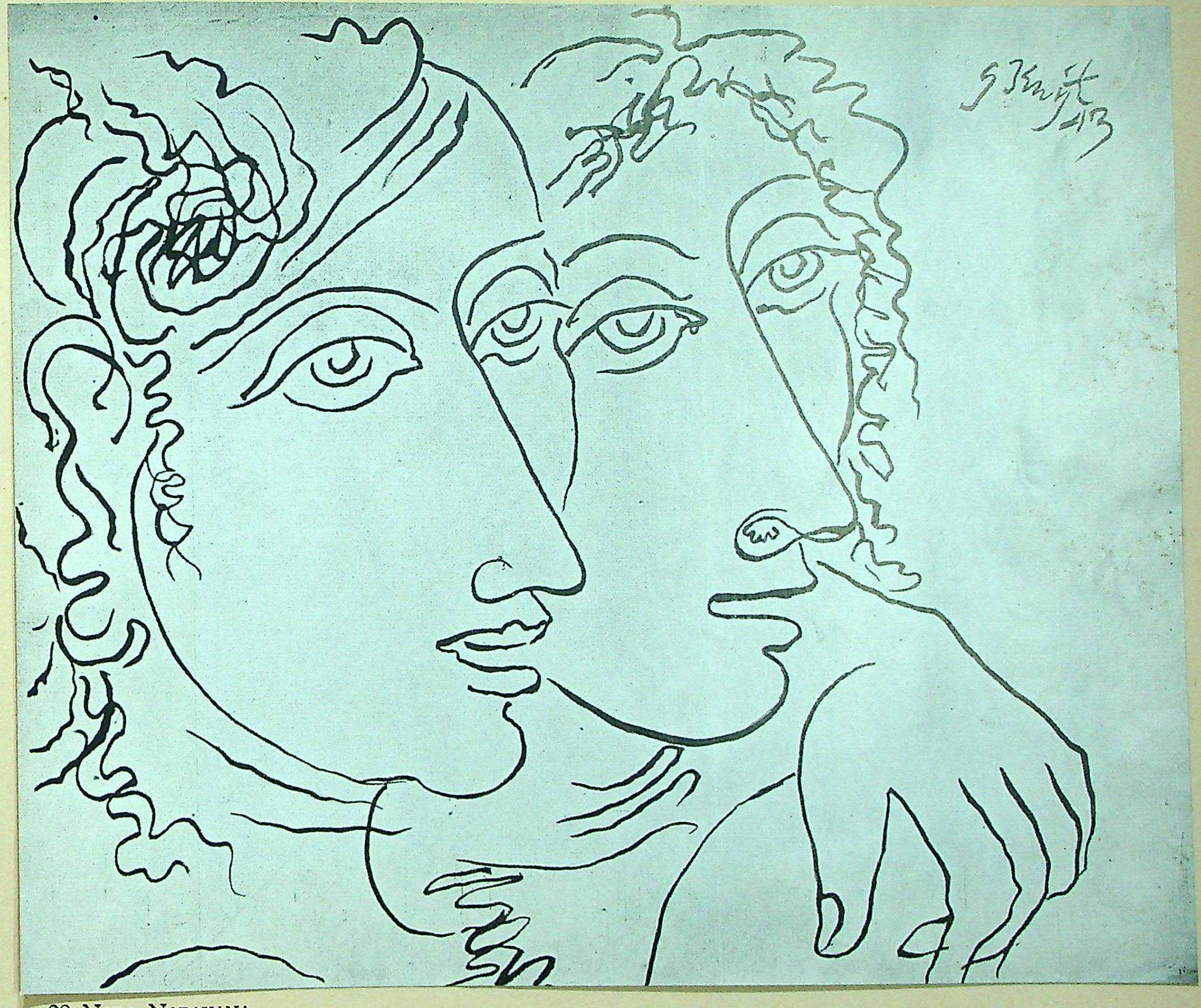
25 Yama and Savitri



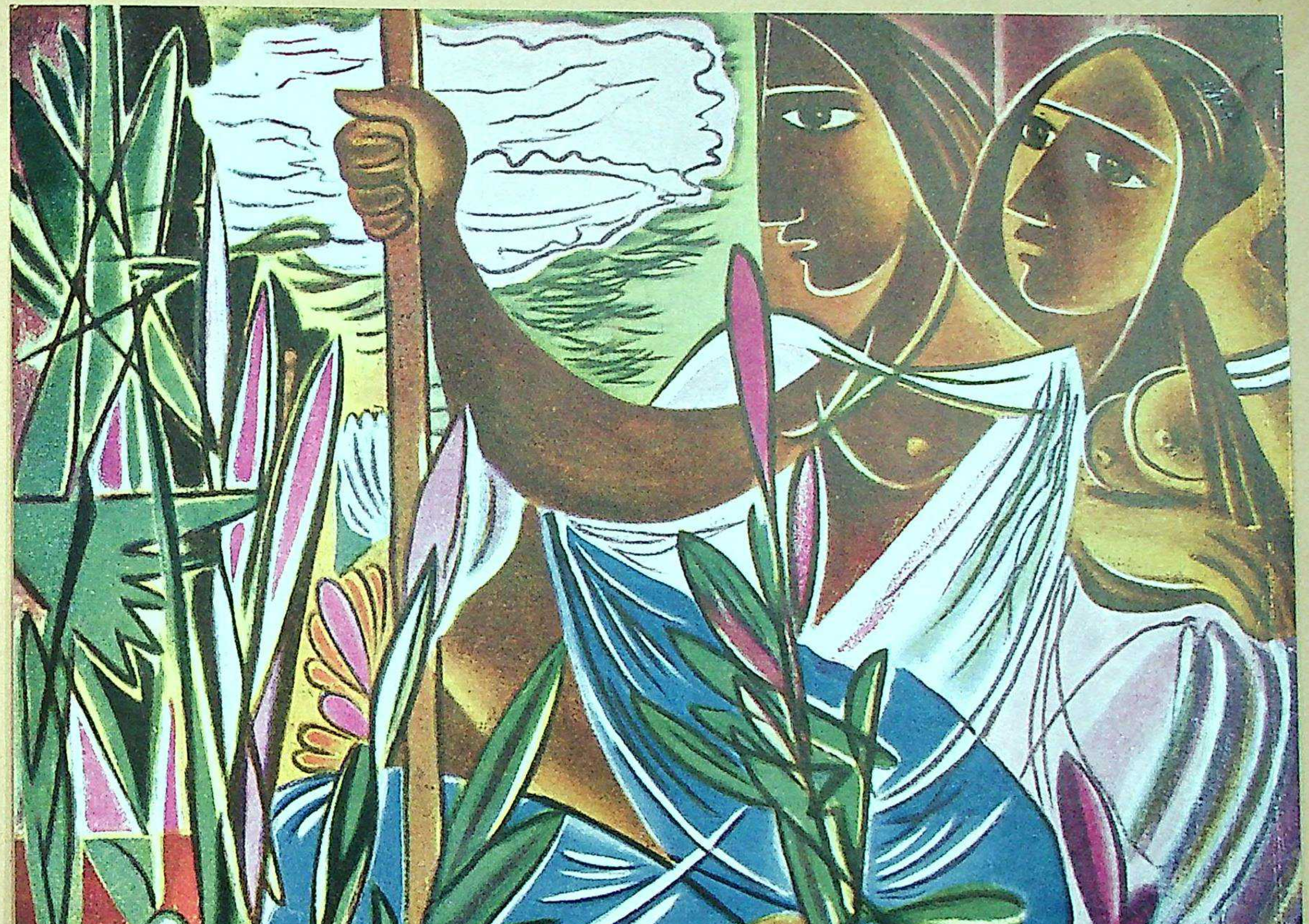
26 PRINCE SIDDARTHA'S DECISION TO RENOUNCE THE WORLD, 1939-40.



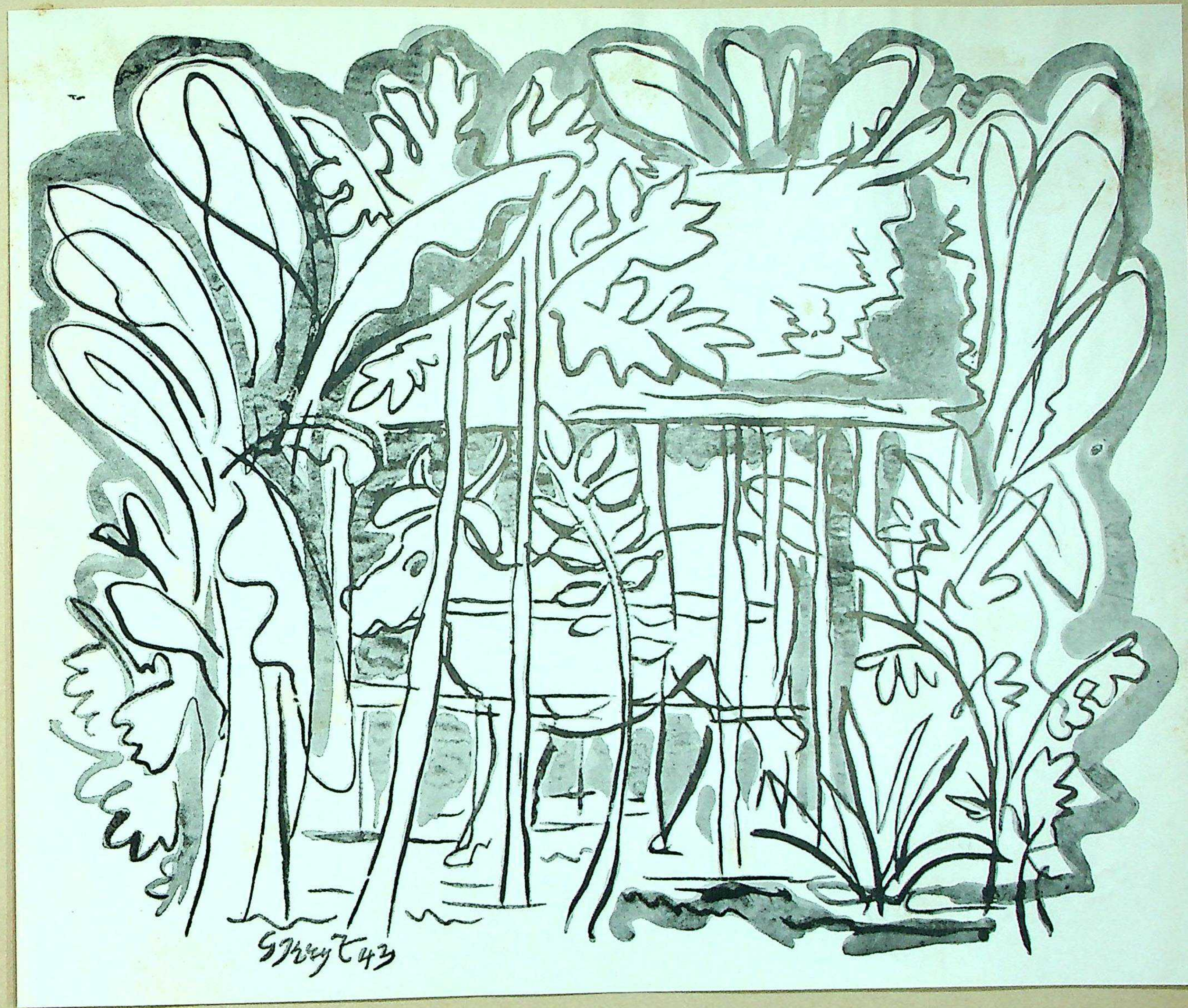
27 Nayika



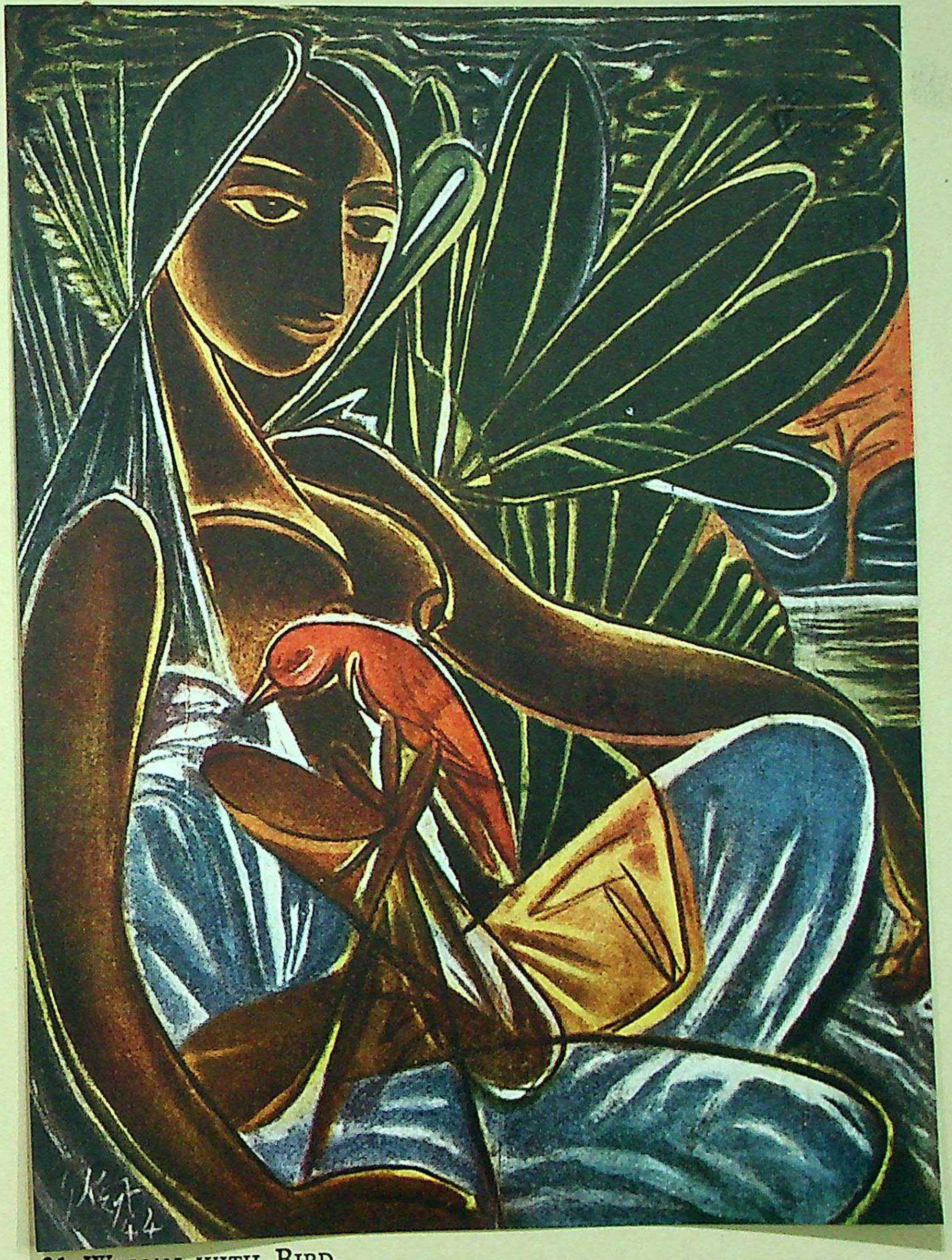
28 Nara Narayana



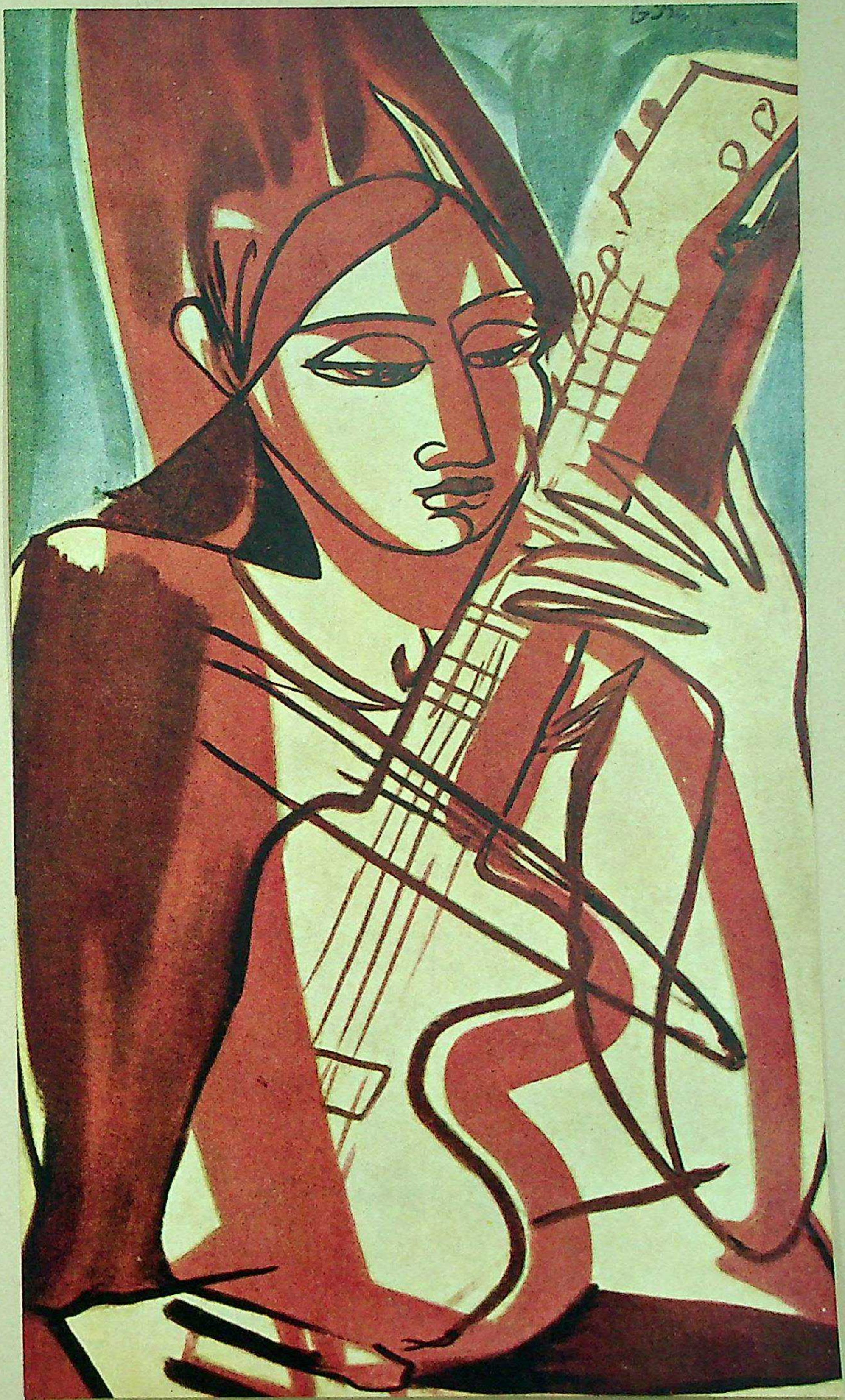
29 THE JOURNEY



30 The Calf

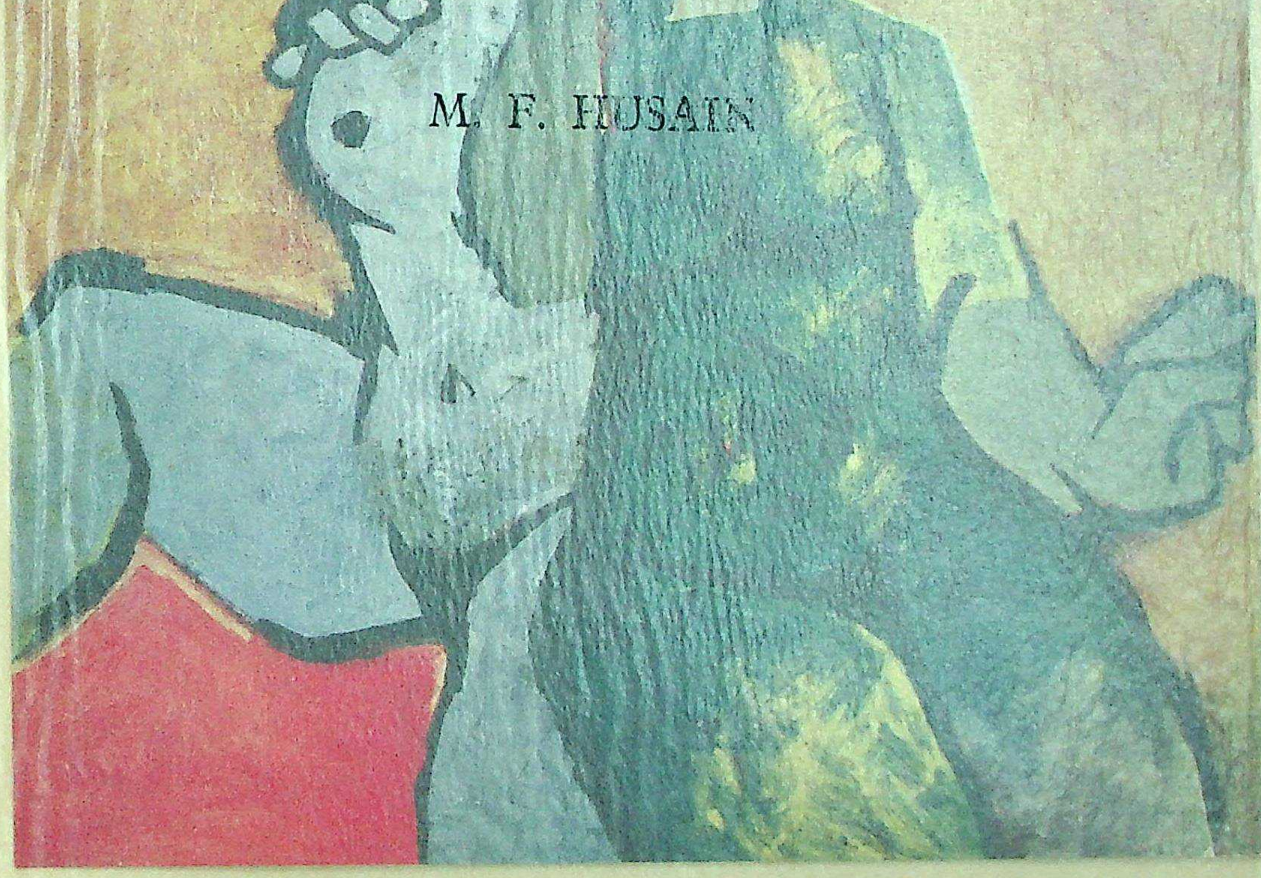


31 WOMAN WITH BIRD

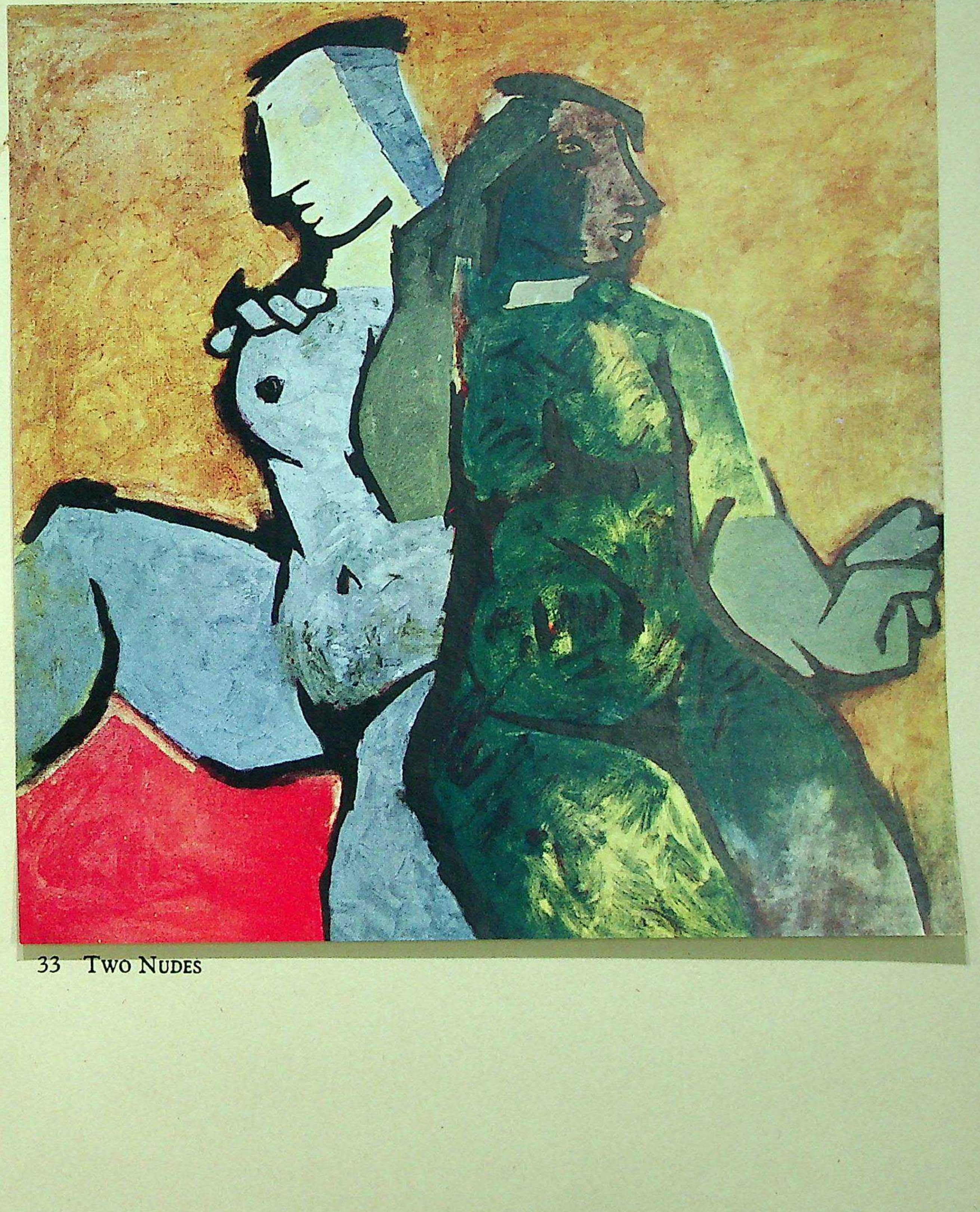


32 Woman with Sarangi

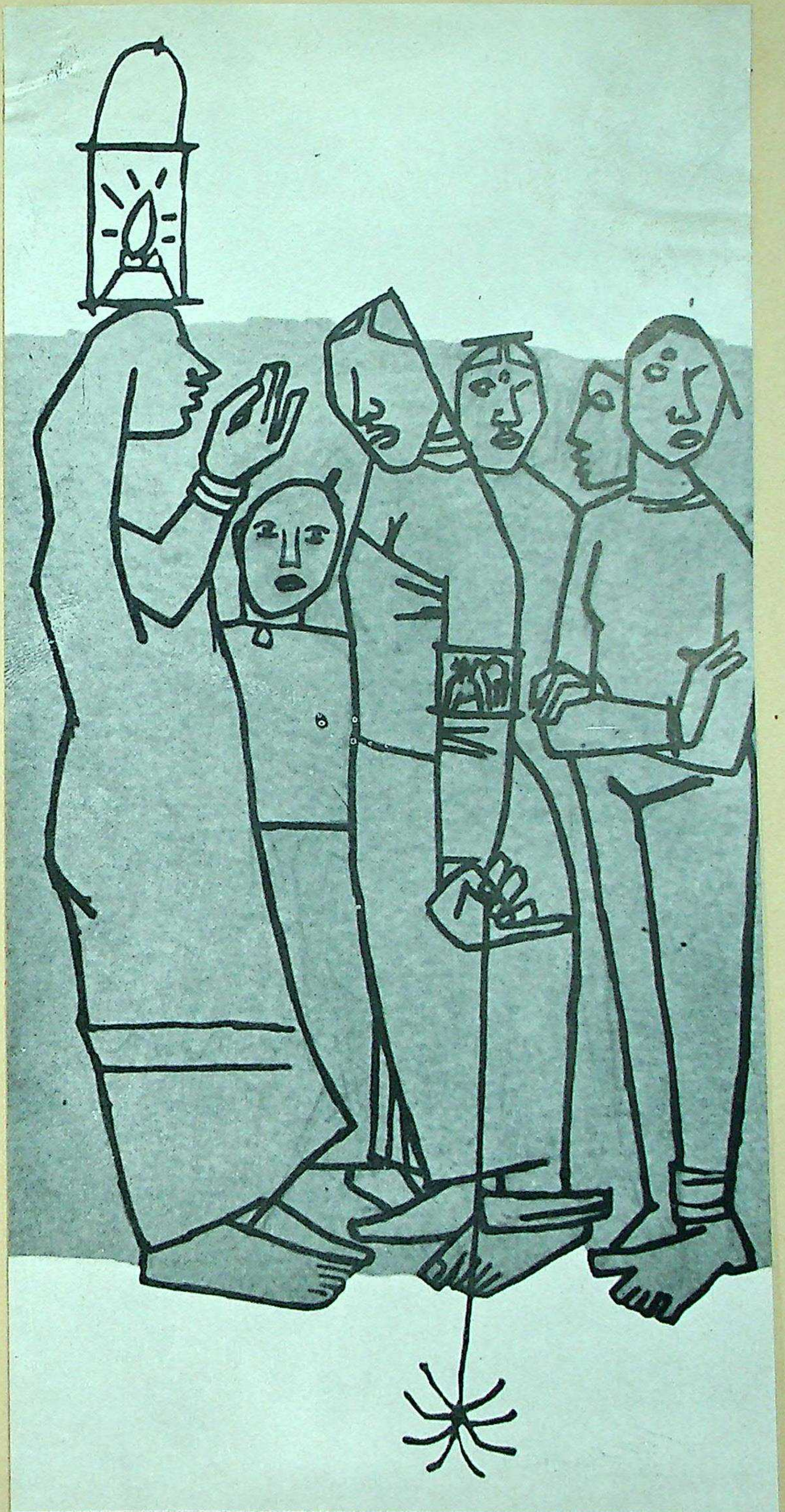
M. F. HUSAIN



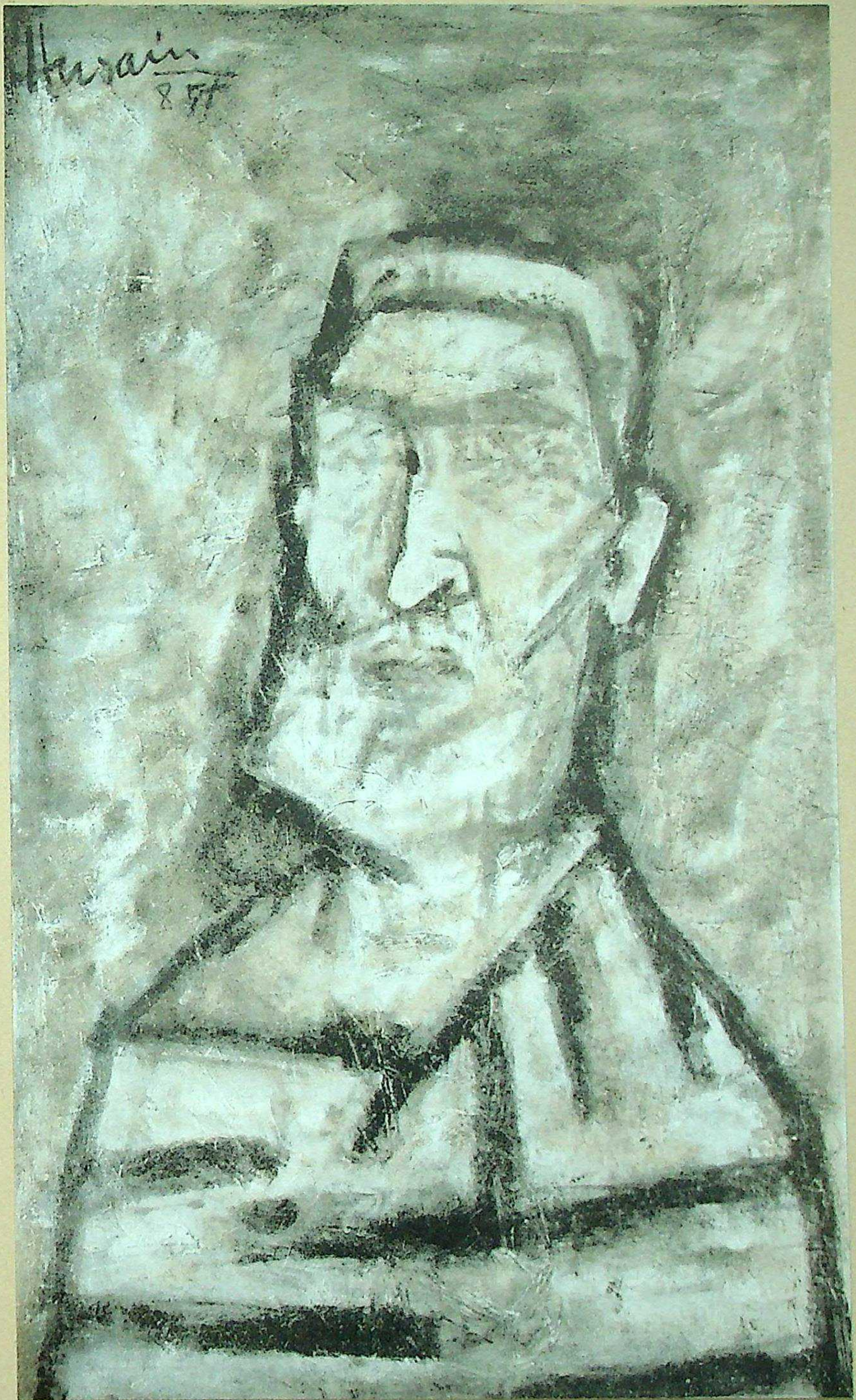
33 Two Nudes



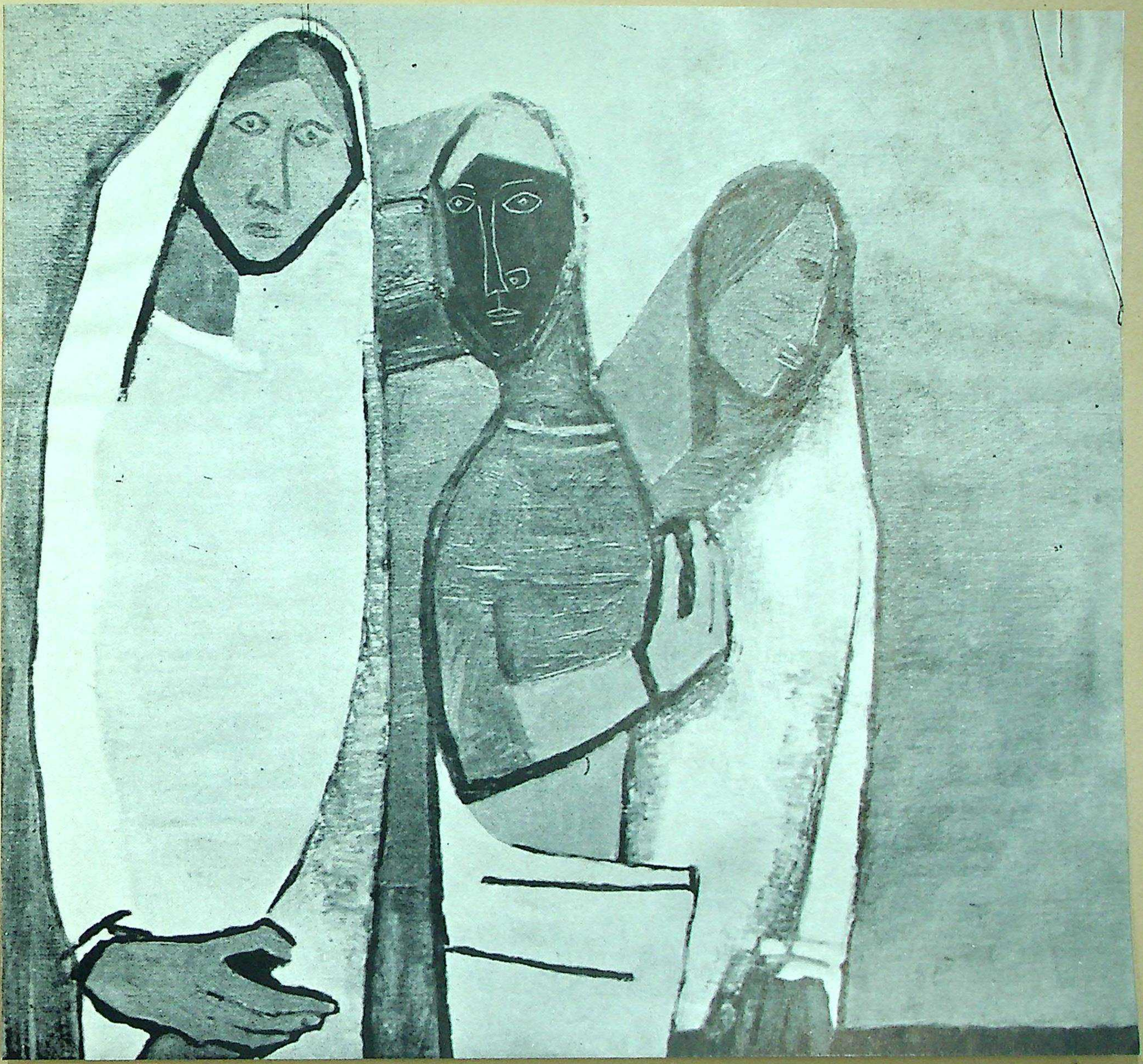
33 TWO NUDES



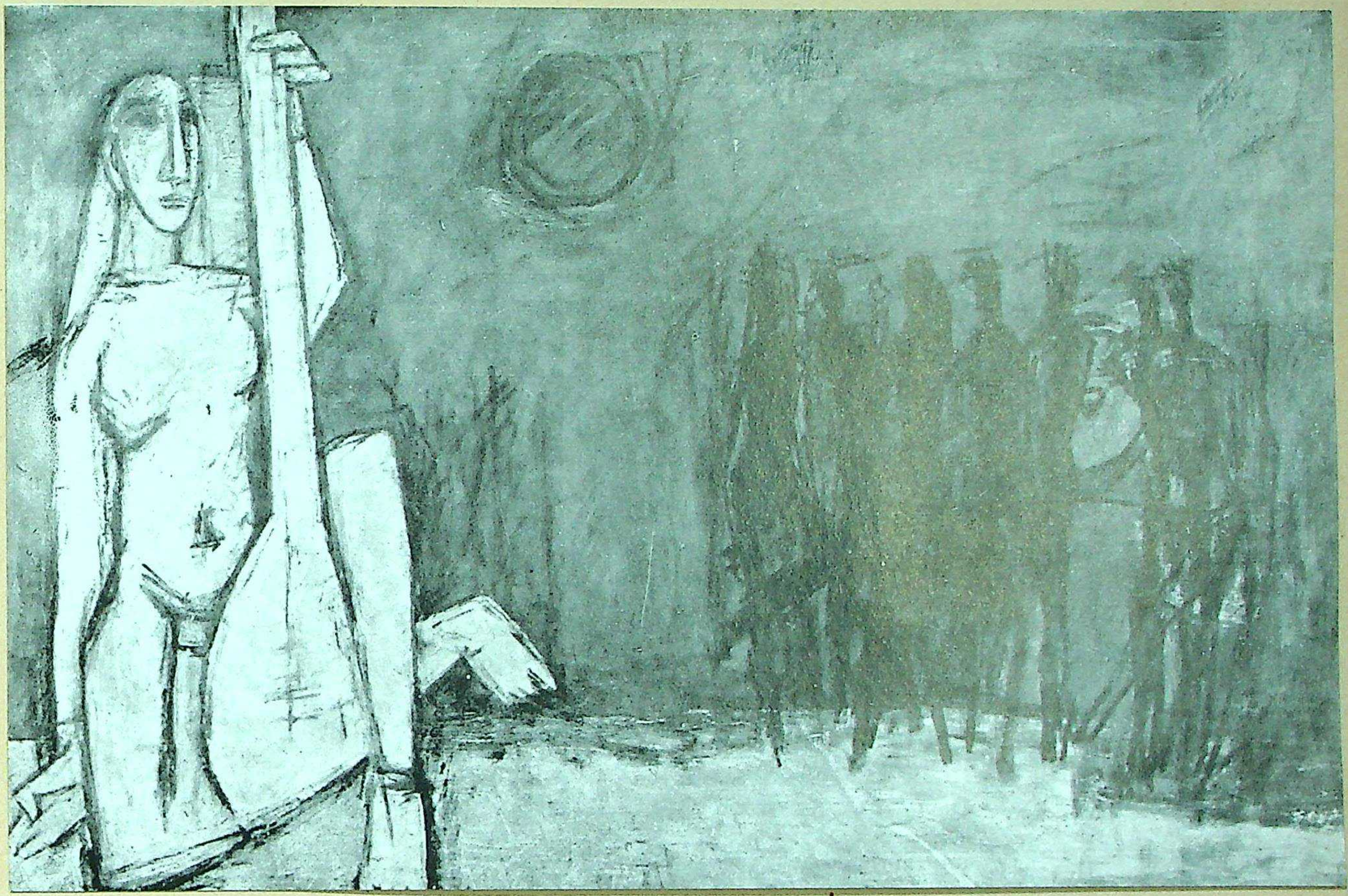
34 BETWEEN THE SPIDER



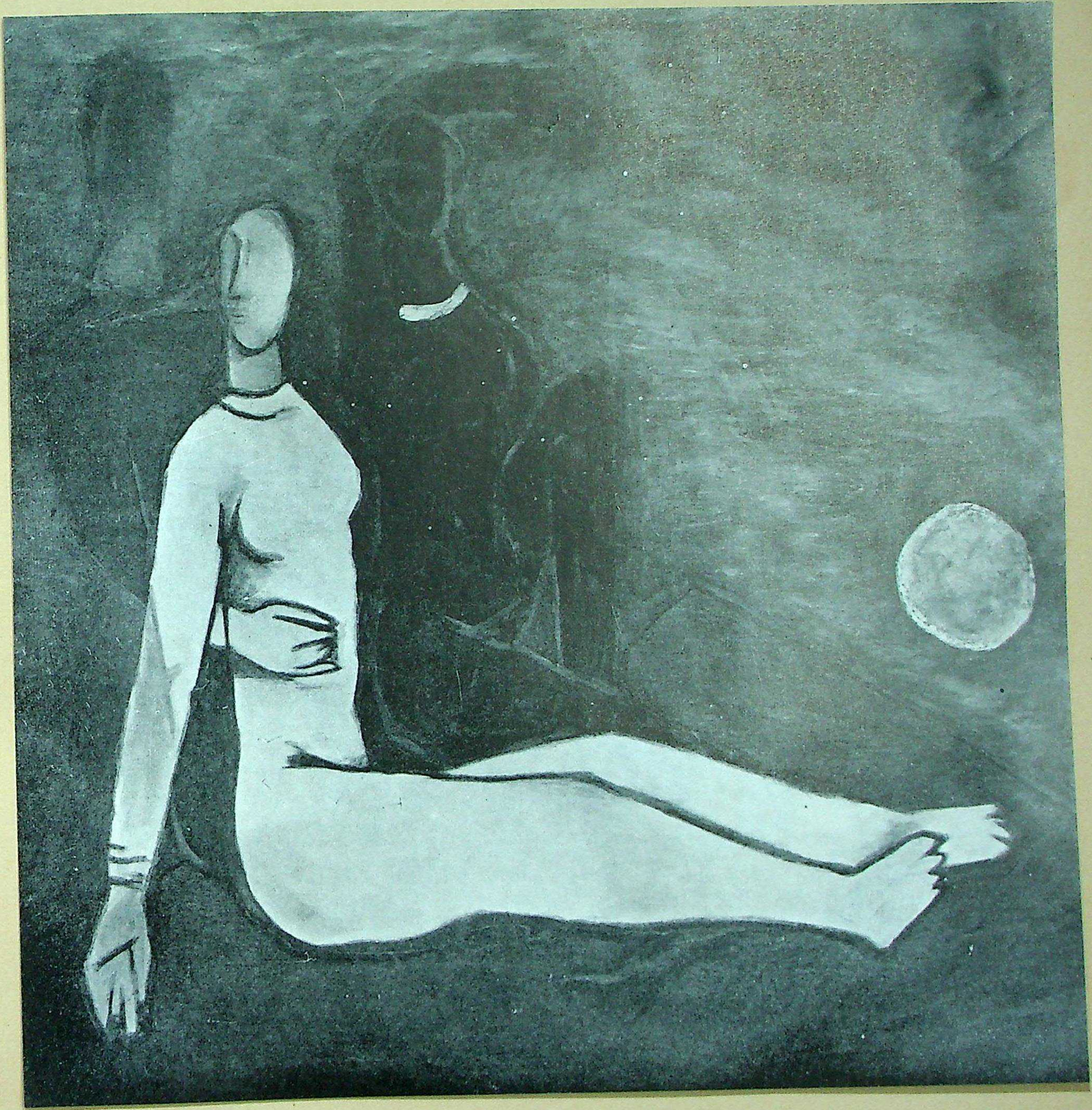
35 **Self Portrait**



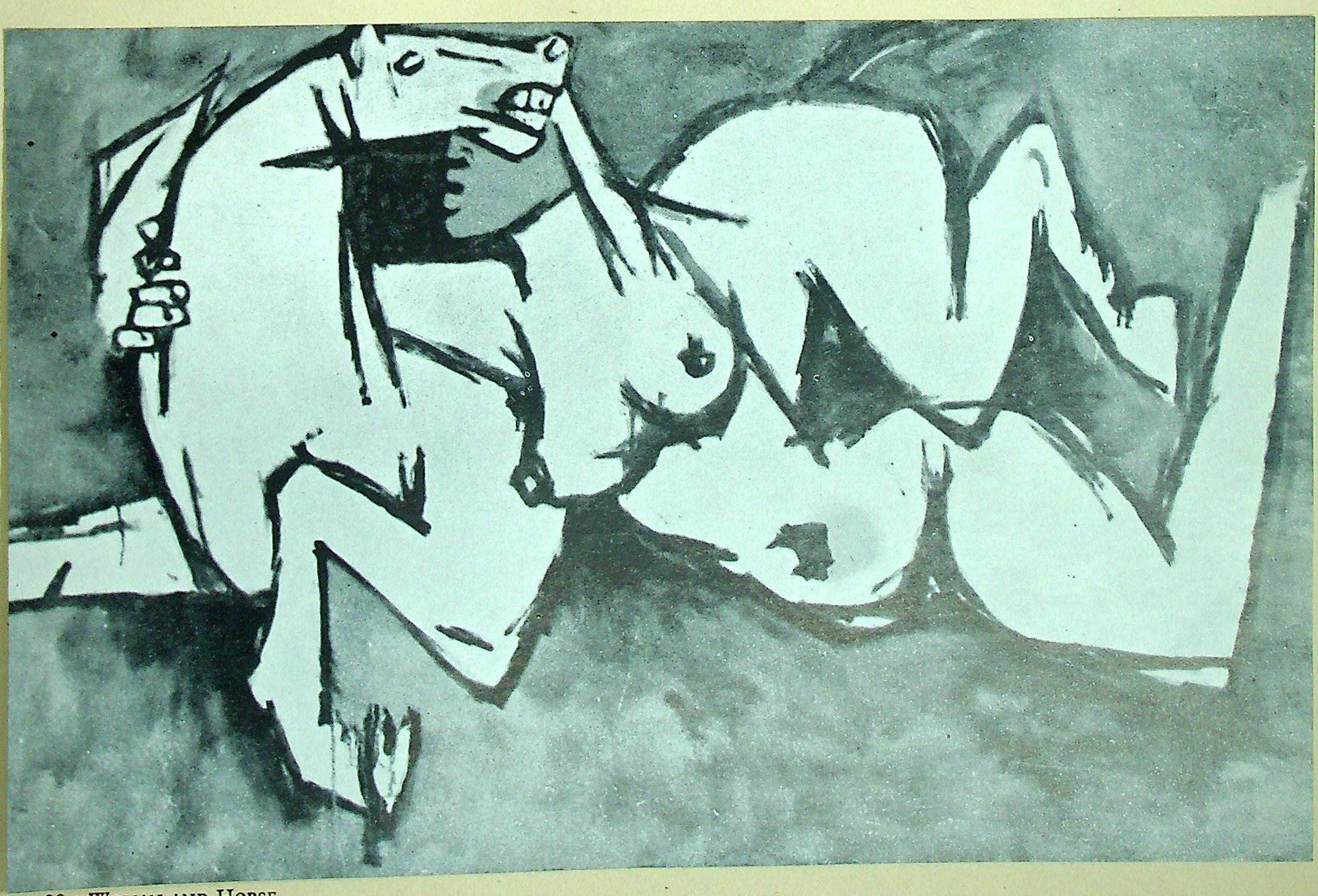
36 THREE WOMEN



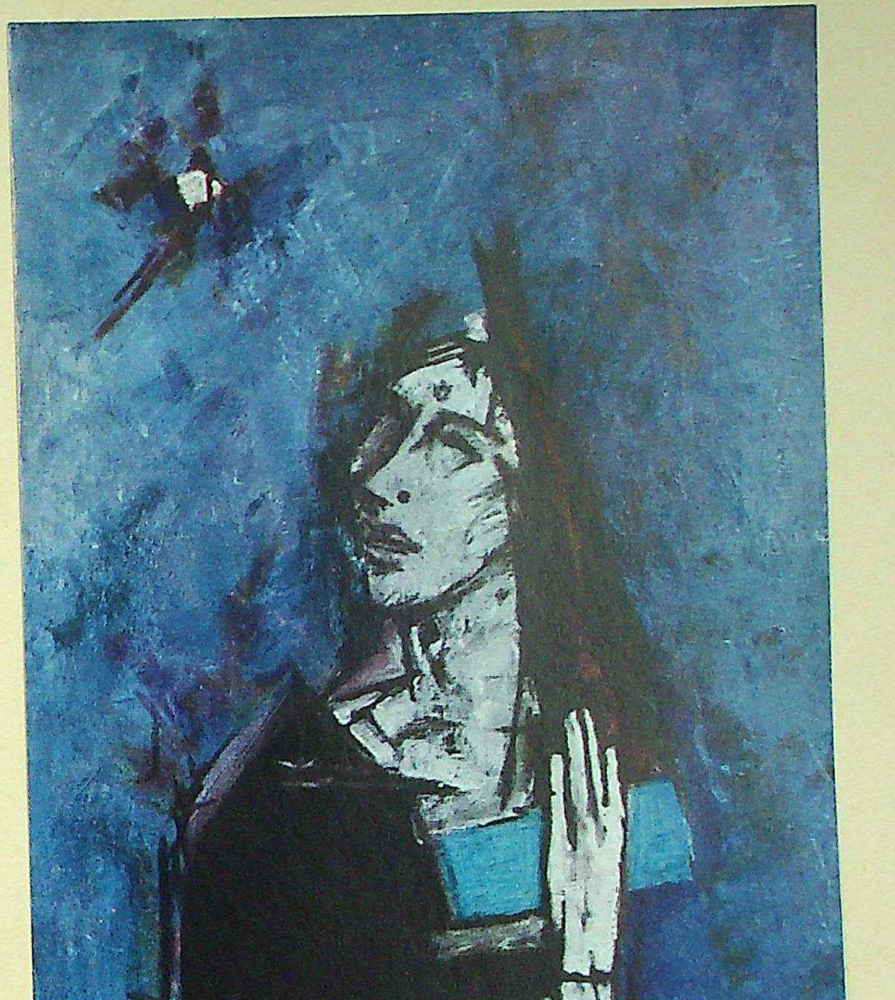
37 SWARA



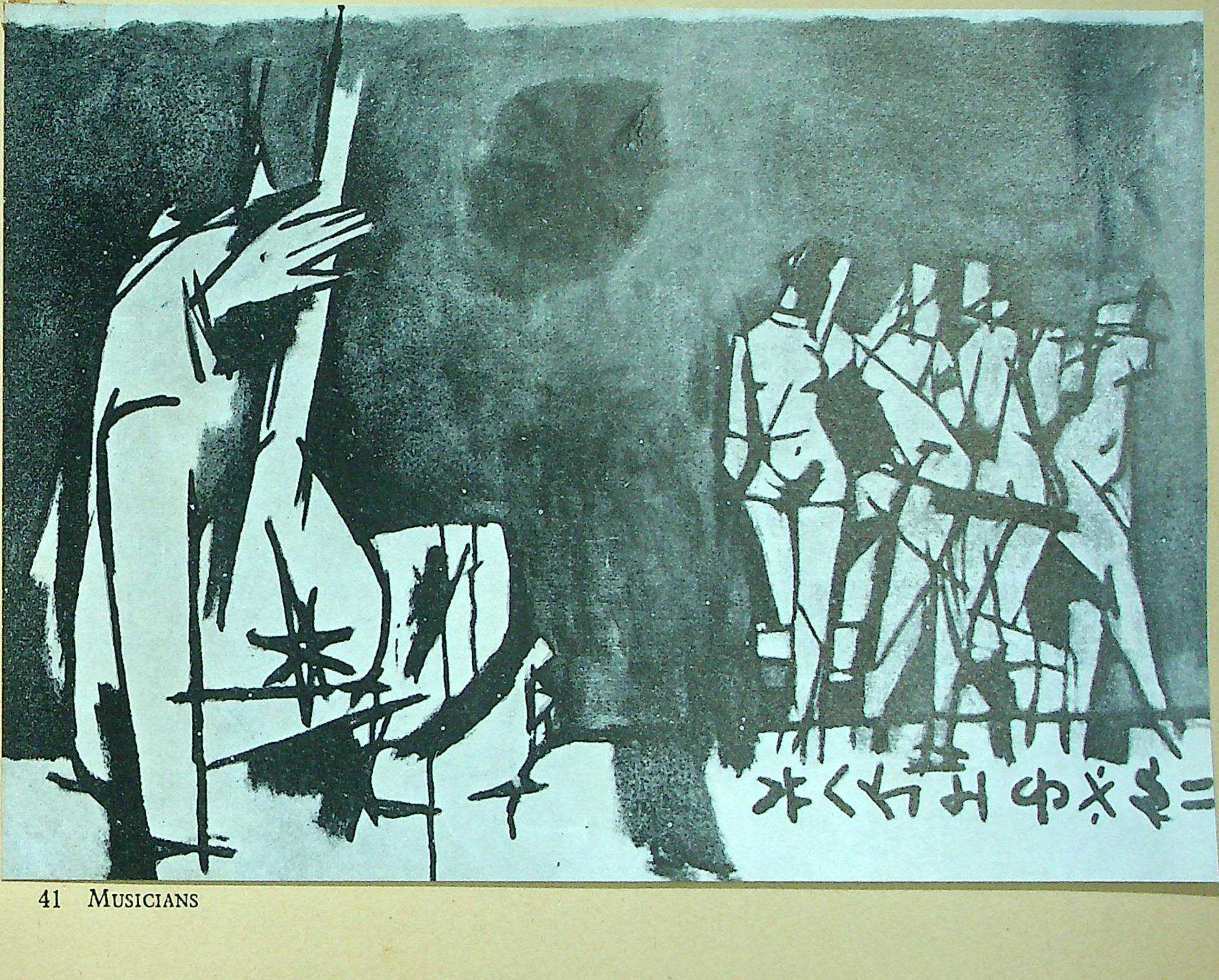
38 Meena



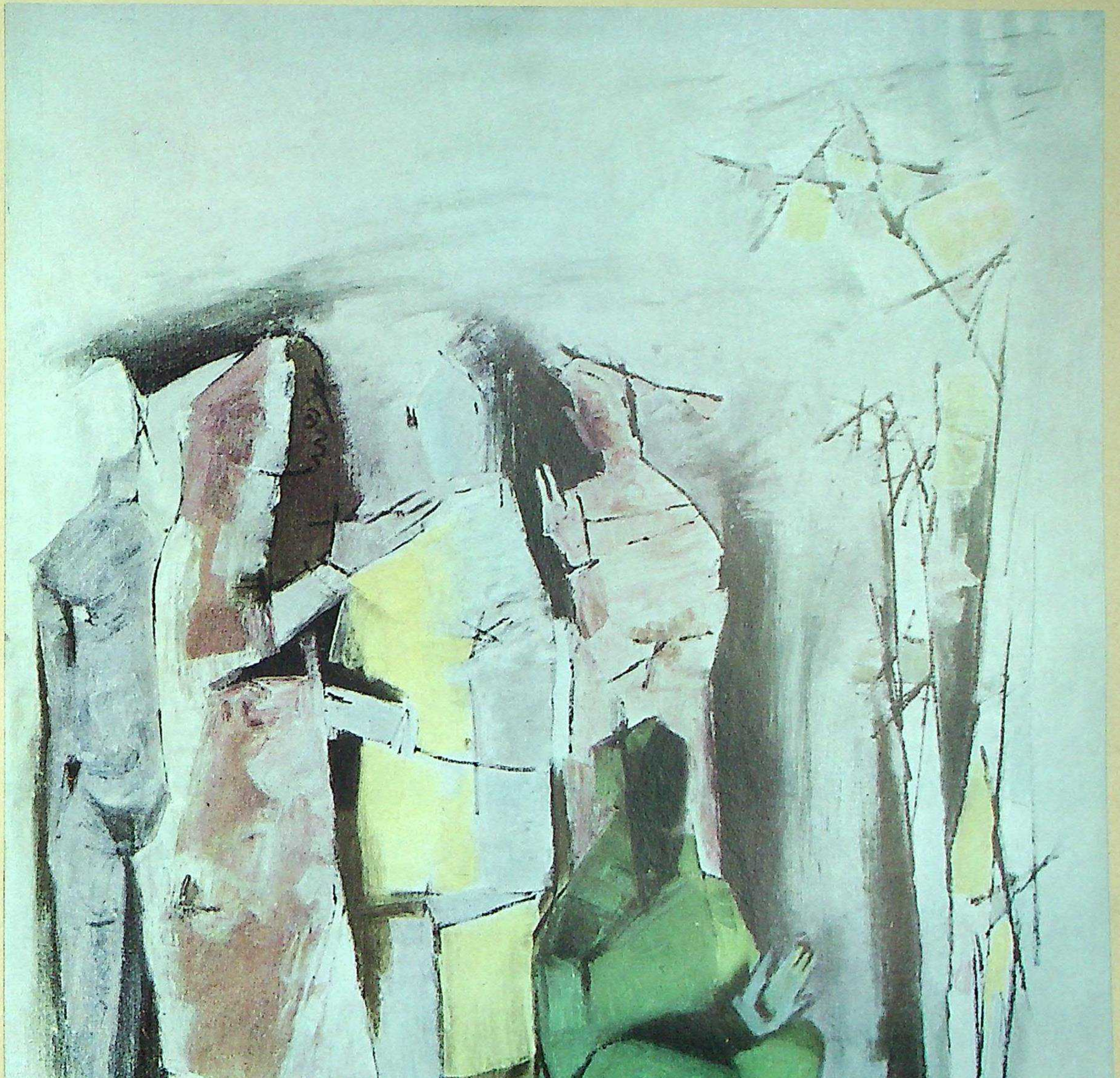
39 WOMAN AND HORSE



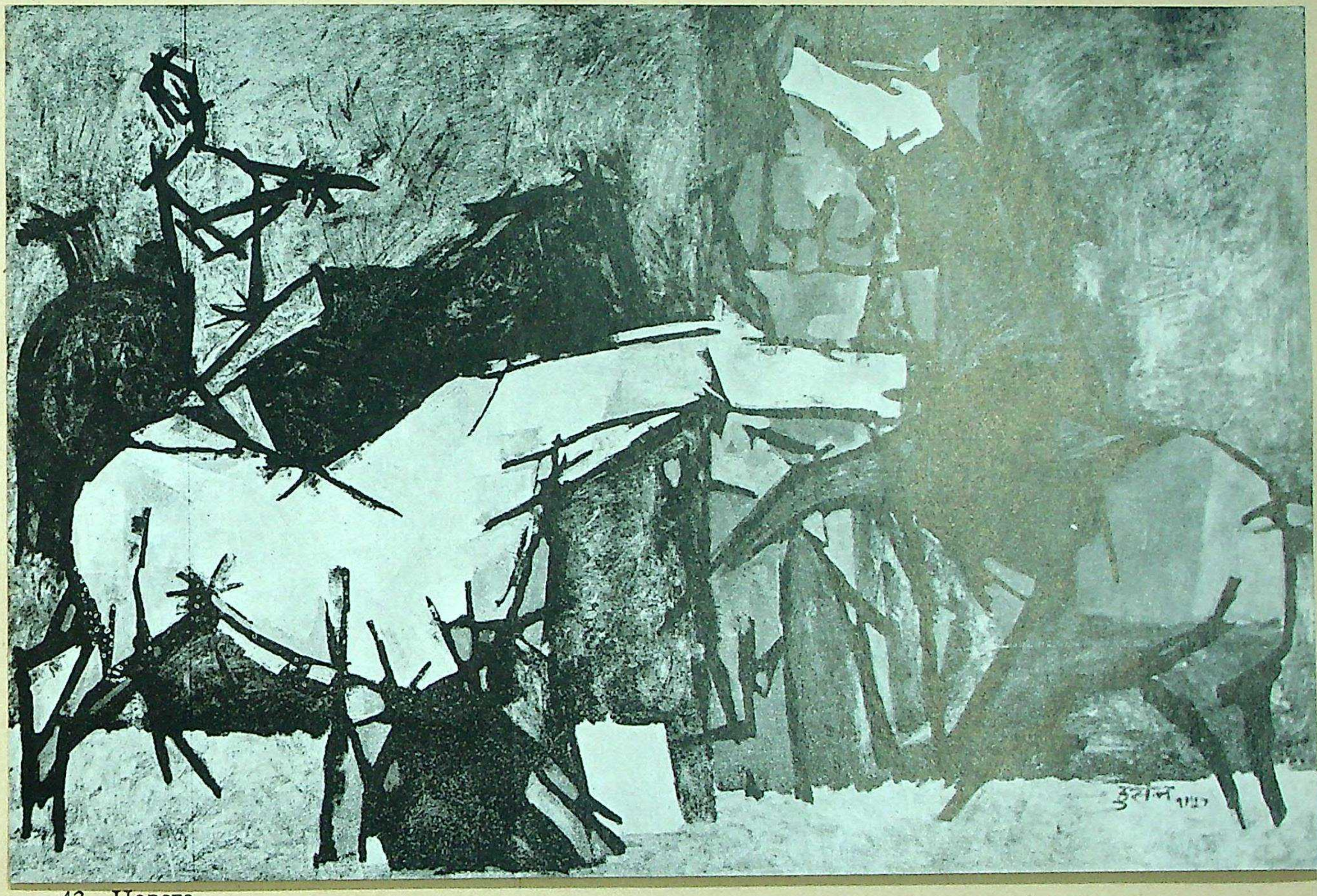
40 Kala Dupatta



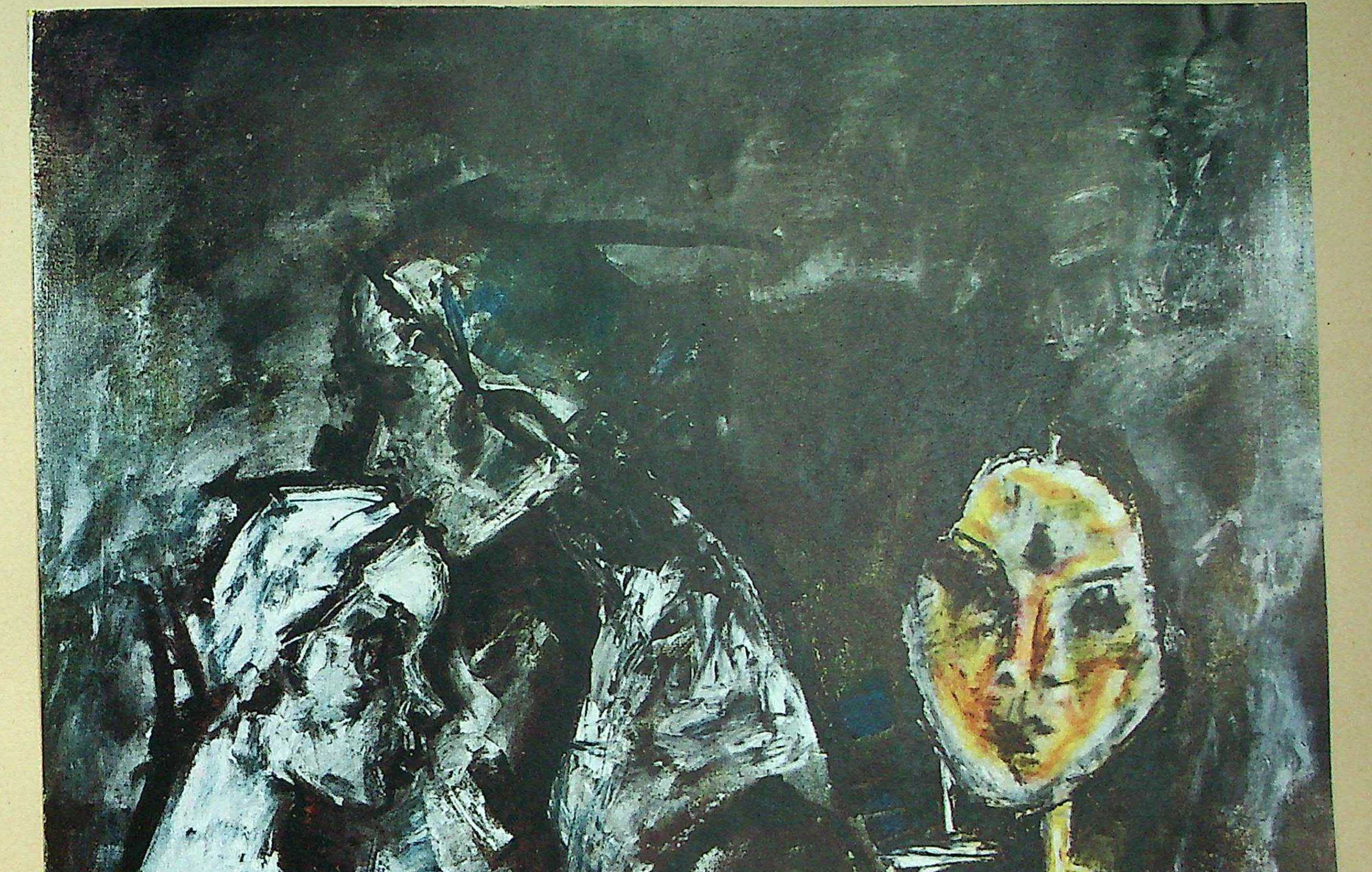
41 Musicians



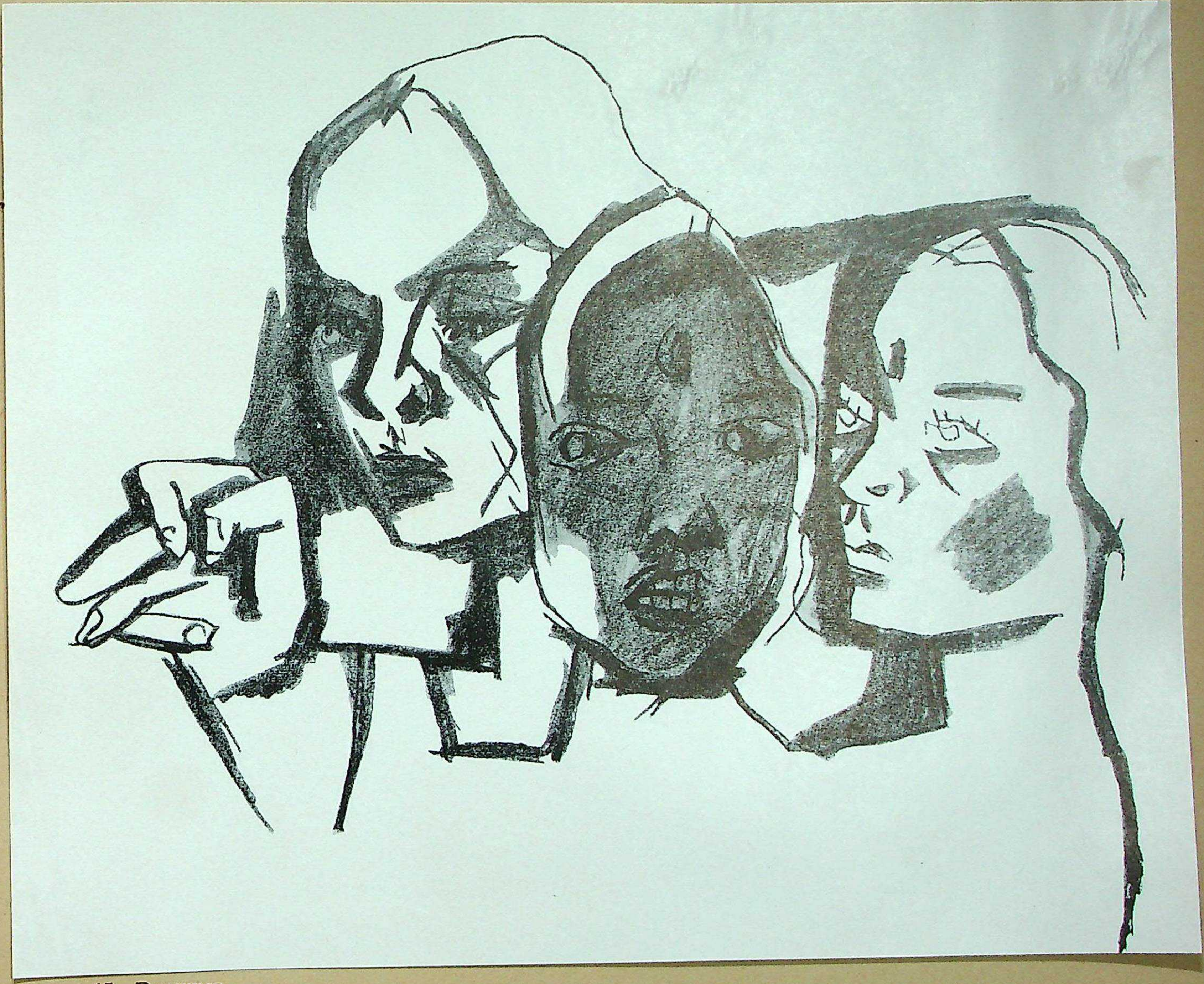
42 THE TREE



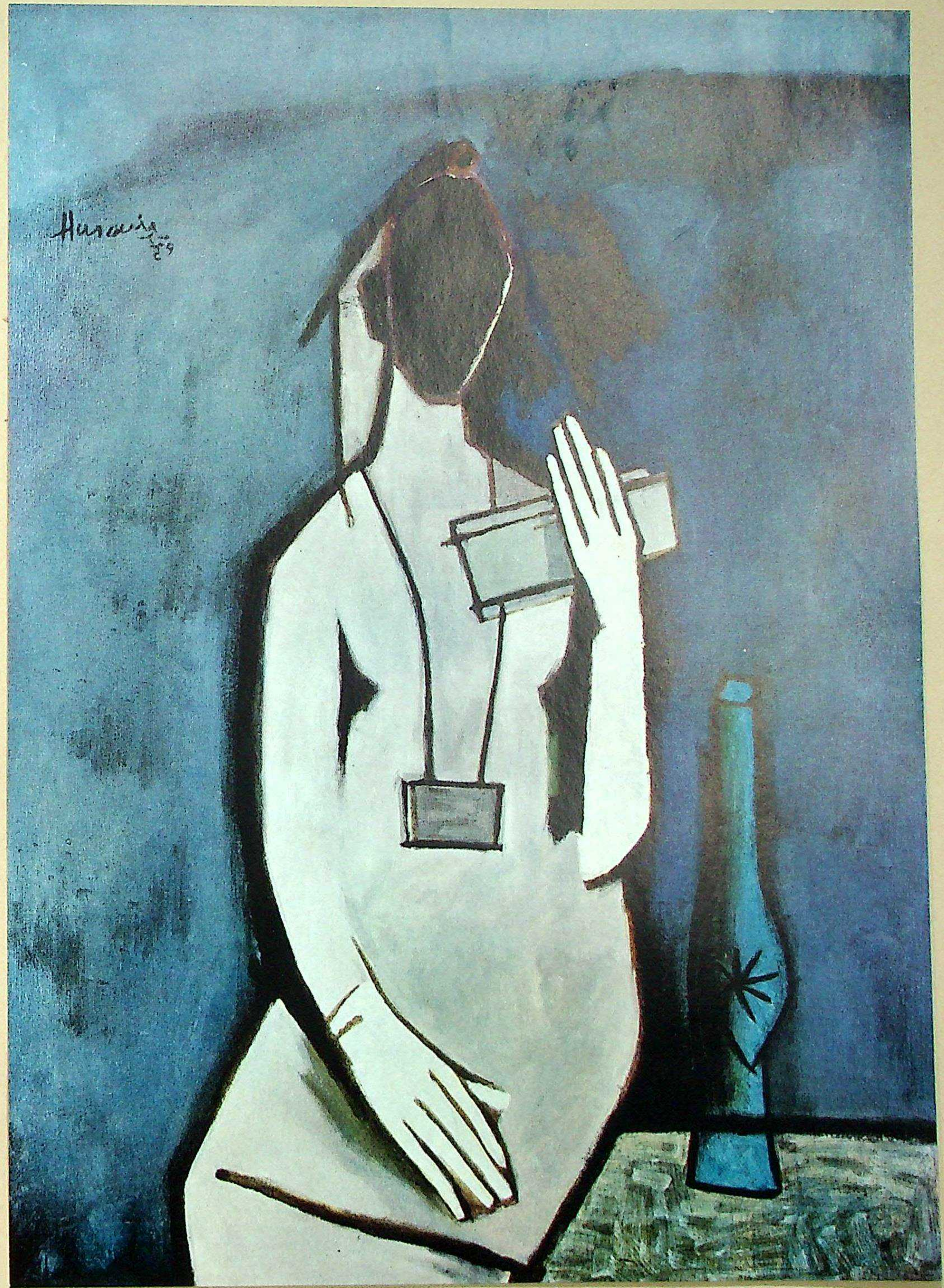
43 HORSES



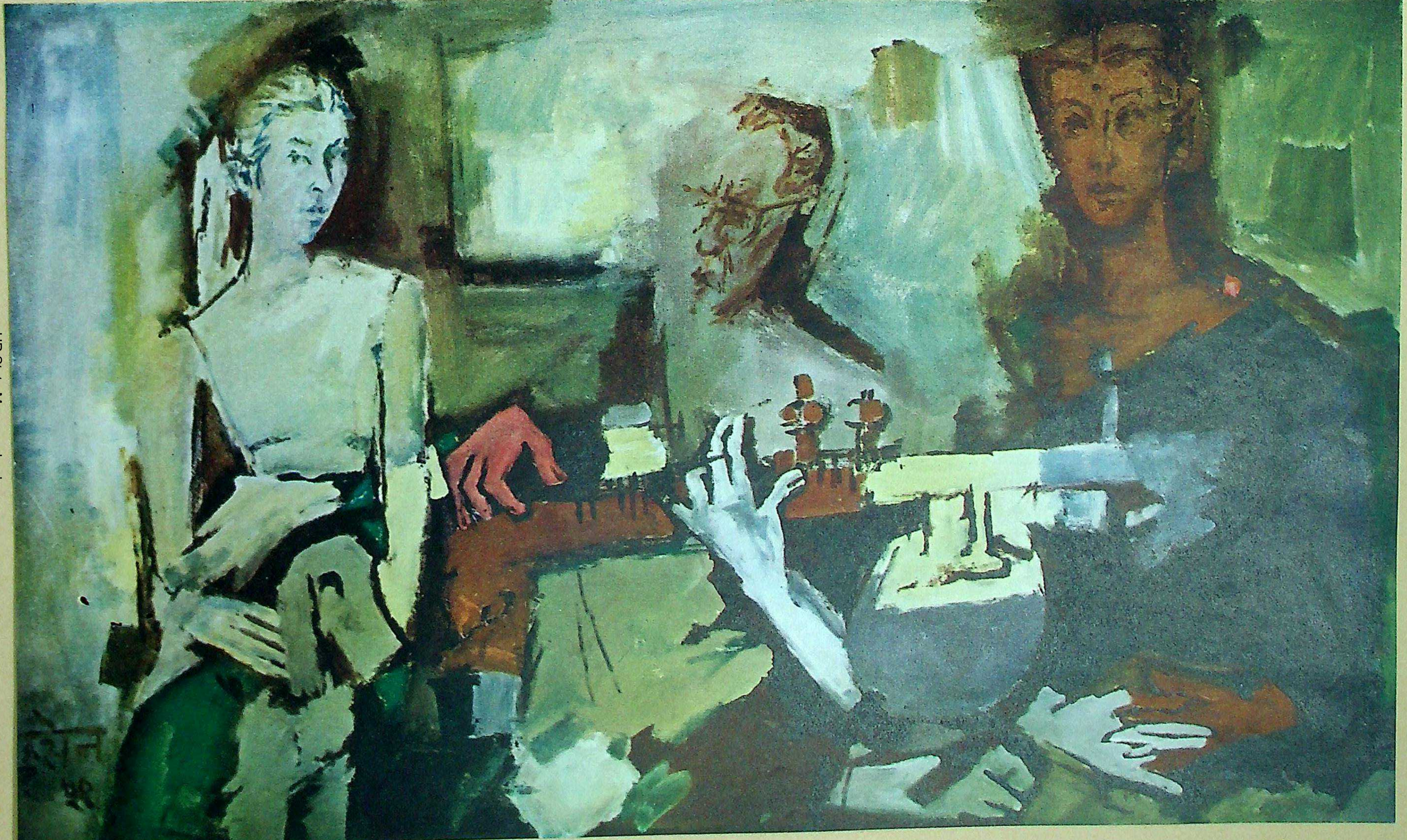
44 KUSUM



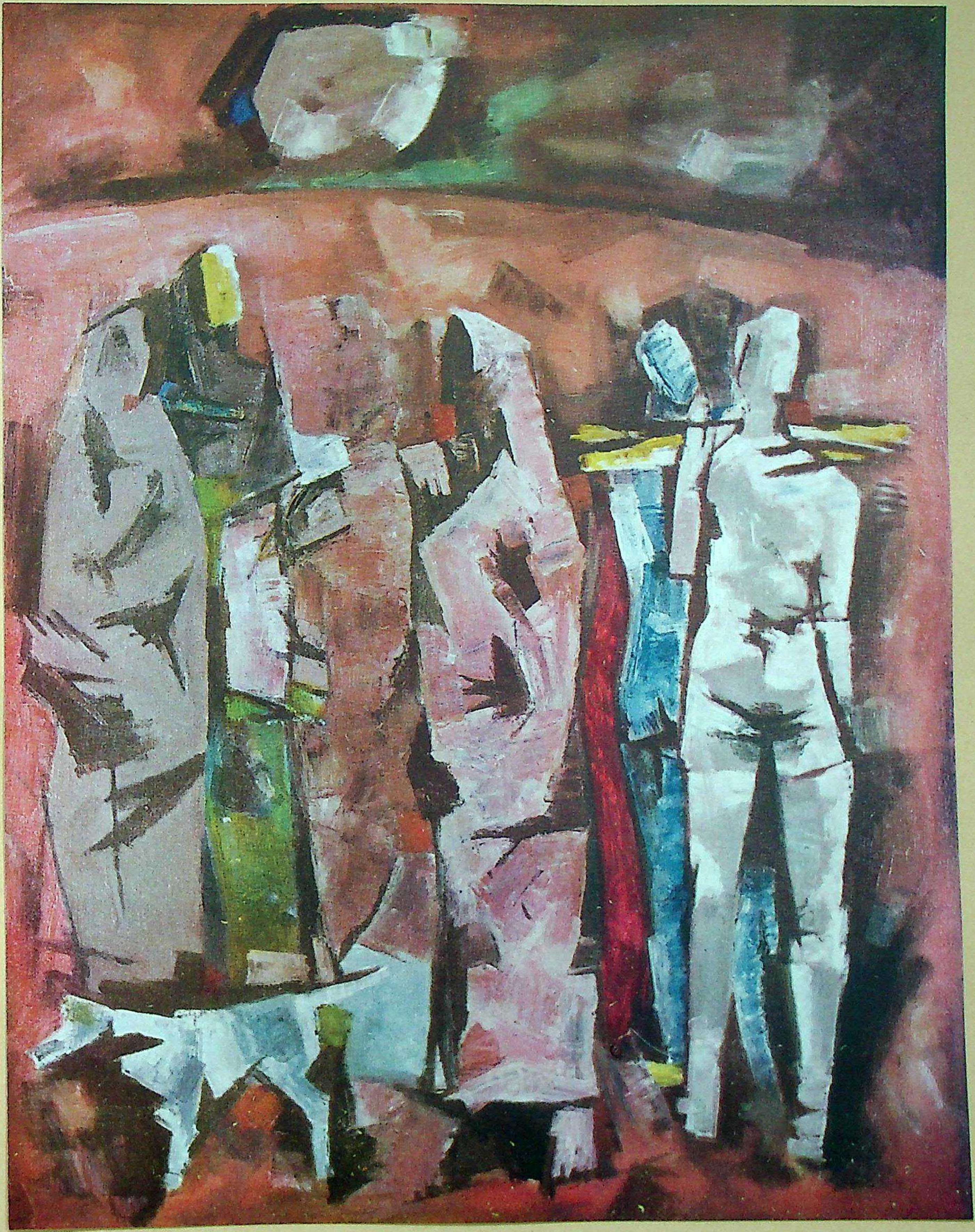
45 DRAWING



46 Blue Night



47 Dr. Narayana Menon's Family



48 GROUP OF VILLAGERS